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MADGE DUNRAVEN

By the Author of
"The Queen of Connaught"

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MADGE DUNRAVEN.

A Tale.

BY THE AUTHOR OF
"THE QUEEN OF CONNAUGHT."

IN THREE VOLUMES.
VOL. III.

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MADGE DUNRAVEN.

CHAPTER I.

DREAMING AND AWAKENING.

IT took Madge a long time to reach the village, for the hail was whistling like small shot right into her face, and the strength of the wind held her back at every second step; so when at length she had passed through the white wicket-gate of the cottage, and reached the threshold, she felt quite exhausted.

There was a bright fire burning in the parlour, and its rays lit up the room with a faint flickering glow. The greyhound was stretched upon the hearth, Mr. Dunraven sat in his easy-chair.

Both were sleeping and both were dreaming, unpleasantly it seemed. The hound quivered and cried fitfully, while his master heaved shuddering sighs and moans.

Madge stepped softly forward and bent for a moment above her uncle's sleeping form. As she did so he stirred uneasily, and muttered audibly in his sleep broken sentences in which Conn's name was repeated again and again. With a sigh she stepped back, and, passing noiselessly up the stairs, reached her own room.

Her uncle's heart was breaking — it needed no words to tell her that. Was

it not visible every day of her life, in his wrinkled face, his whitening hair, his care-worn, drooping form? But just now her thoughts were full of that other, that white famine-stricken creature whom she had just seen on the waste. Her trembling heart sickened within her. Again she felt as if a clammy cold hand was gripping her, and she remembered that her clothes were saturated with the frozen rain. She rose mechanically and changed them, then she lay down upon the bed and tried to ease her aching heart in tears.

But she could not cry. Her eyes and brow were burning feverishly, while her body seemed still to be clutched by an icy hand. As she lay thus, with closed eyes and feverishly throbbing heart, she dozed off, and it seemed to her—for she was dreaming—that the scene suddenly changed.

The room melted into the wild heath on which the rain was beating, scattered broadcast by an angry wind. The heath was clothed in darkness, and desolate as the desert, save for two figures. One, Madge herself, was toiling onward, breasting the fierce storm, and dragging after her, as if with superhuman strength, the struggling figure of a man, wild and ragged, pinched with hunger and cold, and with the pale cold light of approaching death gleaming in his eyes. Those eyes she could not look at, but, though she turned away her head, she felt that they were gazing on her. The man screamed; and his voice, awakening wild echoes all around, turned into derisive laughter and died. He clutched with his fingers imploringly at her dress, he writhed and twisted to get himself free; but Madge

held him safely and dragged him along. Sometimes she paused breathless, sometimes she stumbled among the dripping gorse which covered the lonely heath, but her hold of the man never relaxed: he shrieked and implored, she felt that his eyes were like two balls of fire burning into her brain, but still she dragged him on. As she went, the desolate heath stretching before her seemed suddenly to change into a rolling river, fair and pure, with bright green banks coated over with hoar-frost, the sky changed from black to blue, with great white clouds floating across it. Then the faint cries which the man was struggling to utter seemed to die upon his lips, and Madge, dragging him forward, cast him into the stream.

As his quaking body touched the water, a heavy sonorous sound filled the air, dark-

ness came on suddenly, and blinding rain began to fall. The river surged and rolled past, sucking the man down. But all at once, out of that blackened water, she saw that two eyes were looking at her; and in that instant she knew that the man whom she had been dragging to his destruction was not, as she had supposed, the outcast —but her cousin Conn.

With a shriek, she sprang forward and stretched out her hands to save him; then she opened her eyes and found herself standing wide awake on her bedroom floor. She must have been sleeping for several hours, for it was now grey dawn. The candle which stood upon her dressing-table was spluttering faintly and sending forth its expiring rays, and Madge, listening, heard the sound of footsteps below. The memory of her dream still appalled

her; for a moment she stood trembling violently, but, as soon as she grew more composed, she dressed herself and sat down to think.

At last her prayers seemed answered; her footsteps had been guided to the spot where the murderer was concealed, and now what must she do?

'Go to him again,' said a voice within her; 'tell him the truth, force him to speak, and save your cousin's life!'

Yes, that was what she must do. She would search the heath until she found him again; and then, with God's help, Conn might be set free.

It wanted but six days to the time of the trial, but three to that of her departure from Armstead. Once in Gresham, all her chances of meeting the man would be gone.

She must make good use of the time that still remained.

During the ensuing three days Madge was seldom to be found at home; and every day, as it came, found her paler and sadder than before. She haunted the village like a weary ghost; going forth in the morning shortly after dawn, and at nightfall returning with feverishly beating heart and throbbing brain. Her search was useless. The man had disappeared, and left no trace behind him.

The three days which passed thus, seemed to her like so many hours, so quickly did the time go by. At last one afternoon Madge found herself on the eve of her departure for Gresham. She had been out all the morning searching the heath, and a fresh disappointment made her look more weary than ever. But she

said nothing. She sat listlessly holding her uncle's hand in hers and keeping her eyes fixed upon the blighted lawns outside.

Presently, to her surprise, George Aldyn arrived, comfortably wrapped in his winter great-coat and carrying a fur rug on his arm. He had been summoned as a witness, and he intended to go with the Dunravens to the court. Duty had told him that he should have accompanied Rosamond, who had been summoned as a witness too, but again his feet had led him to Madge. Since that day when he had pointed out to her the stain upon the carpet, the two had not exchanged a word; every day when he had felt inclined to stroll towards the white garden-gate, he had suppressed his inclination and resolutely kept away.

'Where is the use of it all?' he had said

to himself, with his old cynical laugh. 'Am I not working with all my might to save the man she loves best in the whole wide world? Yes, it is better for my peace of mind that I should keep away from Madge.'

But he deemed it absolutely necessary that he should go with the Dunravens to Gresham, for Mr. Dunraven could hardly look after himself now; and at such a time, just until Conn could get free, Madge must have some one to take care of her.

At sight of him, Madge's heart gave a throb, her pale cheek flushed slightly, and a look of pleasure passed rapidly over her face; for a moment she forgot her sorrow, in her thankfulness that George Aldyn had come again. The look, and the blush, were not unnoticed by George, and they seemed to him to compensate for all those weary weeks which he had spent away

from her. With a recklessness inspired by that look and blush, he determined to cast prudence to the winds, and, whatever might come of it, to spend a few happy hours in her company.

His greeting was commonplace enough.

'I thought I might be of some use,' he said, as he took her hand, 'and hearing that you were going to-day, I thought I would go too. Where do you mean to stay?'

Madge shook her head.

'I don't know. I suppose we shall find some place when we get there.'

'And so you will, Madge. I thought that such matters as that would not trouble you, so I went to Gresham a few days ago and secured rooms for you in a small inn close to the court. If we had waited till to-day we should have got nothing, for

now the assizes are on, the town is crammed!'

'Are you going to stay there too?'

'In Gresham? Yes. I put up with an old friend of my father.'

The three passed through the village to the station together, and every moment Madge felt more than ever delighted that George had come. His presence gave her confidence; he spoke hopefully of Conn, and he was so careful of her. It was inexpressibly pleasant to have his arm to lean upon as she walked through the long street of the village, where all the people stared at her so—to feel herself placed by his hands into the best seat in the railway carriage, with his soft fur rug wrapped about her; while he, taking his seat by her side, seemed to anticipate her wishes in every particular.

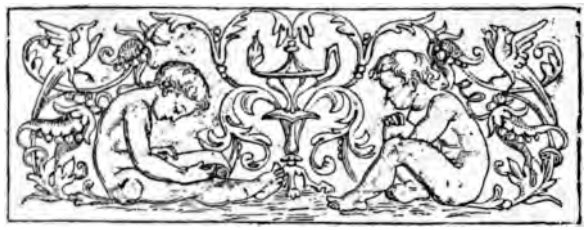
And then it was so comforting to hear him say that Conn *must* get free. To be sure, he knew very little about the matter, and in her inmost heart she felt that he said the words principally with the wish to spare her pain; yet she clutched at them, and tried to persuade herself that they must be very wise.

The bitter winter months had set in, and the days closed in early. By the time our travellers reached Gresham it was quite dark, and one or two stars began to show their lights in the sky. There blew from the north as bitter a wind as had passed over the country for many a day, but the night was fine. As they were leaving the station, George Aldyn cast one keen glance around him, half hoping that he should find a carriage had been sent; but there was neither a carriage nor a cab

to be seen. So, as they had only a few yards to walk, he wrapped his fur rug as well as he could round Madge, took her hand upon his arm, and the three set off towards the inn. He soon found it necessary to put his other hand through Mr. Dunraven's arm, for the old man stumbled a good deal, and once narrowly escaped a dangerous fall.

As to Madge, she walked on like one in a waking dream. She saw strange faces go past her as she moved through the dimly-lighted streets of the town; she felt herself hustled about by crowds, which George, with all his care, could not clear for her; she heard the sounds of voices, the tramp of feet, but she saw and heard as if in sleep. Though her eyes wandered from the noisy streets of the town to the starlit sky above, she saw only one scene,

one face; the scene was the lonely heath at Armstead, the face that of the man who was hiding there. How the face haunted her! When she looked at George Aldyn, she saw it—when she looked at her uncle, she saw it again; and all that night, as she tossed feverishly upon her bed, she seemed to be wandering again upon the heath, searching for a form which she was doomed perhaps never to behold again.



CHAPTER II.

BEHIND THE BARS.

A BRIEF period of unconsciousness, then Madge started up trembling with fear. Strange sounds had awakened her. She arose, drew aside her curtains, looked around the room, and remembered all. She was in Gresham, and from below her window issued the sounds she had heard: the rattling of vehicles, tramping of feet, and murmur of human voices. What a roar

it seemed after the quietness of Armstead. On ordinary occasions the town was dull enough, but now that the assizes had begun, the influx of people was so great that the inns were not roomy enough to hold them. They flooded the streets even at this early hour, for when Madge looked out of her window, her eyes rested upon a sea of moving heads and faces, a constant patter of feet was heard up and down the stairs of the inn, and the bells kept up a continual jangle.

It was a lovely day—clear, crisp, and bright—like a mixture of frost and sunshine. When Madge threw open her window a burst of sunlight flooded the room, but on looking down into the street she saw that, during the night, snow had fallen; it was now blackened with the traffic, and fast melting beneath the warm

rays of the sun. She leaned out of the window and looked up and down the street to discover, if possible, the locality of the inn: it stood in the principal street of the town, a few hundred yards from the railway-station, and within sight of the gaol and the court. She had finished her survey and was about to withdraw from the window, when her eyes were arrested by a familiar figure which was making its way through the crowd. As she recognised George Aldyn she felt her heart give a bound, her face flush; but when, two minutes later, she went downstairs and found him in the sitting-room with her uncle, she was as grave and cold as ever.

George had just returned from the court and the gaol. At the court, he had learned that the cases were being disposed of so

quickly that the hearing of Conn's case was likely to begin the very next day; and at the gaol, that Conn would be at liberty to receive visitors at three o'clock that afternoon.

'If you don't mind,' he said, 'I will go as far as the prison with you. You can't possibly go alone, Madge. The streets are crammed with roughs of every sort, and towards evening most of them are drunk and fighting. It is really not safe for you to go about without an escort!'

So, as Madge made no objection, and as his presence seemed to bring some comfort to Mr. Dunraven, he remained at the inn all day, and, just before three o'clock, went out with them to the gaol.

The three walked together right to the entrance of the prison; here they paused, and George Aldyn rang the bell.

After a delay of a few minutes the gate was opened by a tall, grim man, who wore the prison uniform. He touched his hat in a military manner, and, without a word, stood bolt upright in the aperture which the open door had made. George Aldyn presented the visiting-order: the man looked at it, then again touched his peaked cap and moved aside, standing like a well-drilled soldier, to allow the visitors to pass in. While Mr. Dunraven and Madge entered by the open door, George Aldyn remained outside. But he did not go away. As soon as the great gate closed with a heavy clang he lit a cigar, and paraded patiently up and down the street, waiting for their return.

Meantime Madge found herself standing with her uncle and the warder in the prison-yard. It was a small square space,

stone-paved, shut in on every side by the blank whitewashed walls of the gaol. Here, during the night, snow had fallen—and here it lay still. But Madge had not much time to look about her. As soon as the gate closed it was carefully locked, and the officer, leading the way across the yard, invited the visitors to follow him.

Madge had been in the place once or twice before, but never had it produced upon her so depressing an effect as it did that day. The air was so cheerlessly cold, and the only peep of the sky then visible was darkened with jet-black clouds. Five minutes before, a man, who that afternoon had received the sentence of death, had been carried in a fainting condition to the condemned cell, and now the doctor, armed with restoratives, was hastening across the yard to his relief.

One or two officers hung about, and here and there was a prisoner, busy at some menial work. The warders who were there to watch the prisoners, looked grimly at each other, and glanced at Madge as she passed by, but no one spoke.

The warder, having led the way across the yard, paused before a door, which was painted a dull leaden-looking drab, and, producing a huge bunch of keys, selected one and inserted it in the lock. He turned it, the door gently swung back on its hinges, and the officer, again standing aside in an erect military manner, suffered the visitors to enter.

Mr. Dunraven obeyed him; Madge was about to do so, when her ear caught a sound which made her pause. It was a long, low, piteous moan, followed by a

loud cry and a fit of violent sobbing. Madge started, for the sound seemed close to her elbow. She turned her head; there was no person near; but she saw that on her right arose another dull drab door, and across this was painted in black letters, 'Punishment cells—17-18-19.'

She was about to question the officer, but his calm, business-like manner repelled her. He stood like a statue, and again motioning her to follow her uncle, announced 'Visitors for Dunraven.'

'Dunraven is exercising, but the visitors can wait,' was the reply; and, without more ado, Madge was obliged to enter and allow the door to be closed and locked behind her.

Madge found herself now in a flagged corridor, the sides of which were composed of doors painted like the others a dull

drab, and labelled like the rest with great black letters. Here another military-looking officer took them in charge, and led the way along the paven floor to the door which was labelled 'Visitors' room.' This door was partly open; the officer threw it wide for the visitors to enter.

It was the same room in which they had both interviewed Conn before; a small square chamber, divided in the middle by an iron grating; its walls were newly whitewashed, its boarded floor scrubbed clean. It had two doors: one that by which the Dunravens had entered, the other exactly opposite, on the other side of the iron bars. A bit of fire burnt in the grate, and through the window crept the cold grey light of day. Mr. Dunraven took a seat sadly by the fire;

Madge walked over to the window and looked forth.

She saw the exercise-ground covered, like the prison-yard, with hardening snow, and shut in on every side by blank prison walls. The untried prisoners were exercising; in their ranks was Conn. There were some fifteen or twenty in all, and they walked three abreast, in a long military line, round and round the confined piece of ground. Some of these, having cast aside their own clothes, had donned the 'untried prisoners'' uniform of sober grey; others still retained their own clothes. Amongst the latter was Conn. He was still attired in the dark tweed shooting-suit which he had worn when arrested, his black wideawake hat not only covered his drooping head, but shaded his face from every eye. It smote Madge to the

heart to see him, for he had to walk in line like the condemned prisoners, and he too was under the warder's vigilant eye. After that one look Madge turned with a smothered sob from the window, and spent the rest of the time standing by her uncle's side.

In a few minutes more the door in the opposite wall opened, a clanking of irons was heard outside, then a warder appeared, bringing in Conn. Mr. Dunraven, trembling now with the excitement of meeting, started up to greet his son: Madge remained by the fire utterly unable to stir. The sight of her cousin deprived her for the moment of all power both of speech and action. He was so changed. His hair still retained its colour, but over his face there had crept a look like that of premature age. He might have been

taken for a man of forty now; a man, too, to whom the troubles of life had not come singly. Madge thought, in looking at him, that the fear of being condemned had wrought this change; she did not know that, night after night, day after day, he had been watching, hoping, praying for a face which did not come, and that each fresh disappointment deepened the lines of anguish on his own features. Night and day his heart cried on Rosamond, but she was far away and would not hear.

The sight of his father, seeming so pitiably broken, of Madge, looking so pale and careworn and sad, drove, for a moment, the thought of Rosamond completely from his mind. He stretched forth his hands, and as he did so, there passed across his face a look which brought back to their minds the boy of brighter days.

His face seemed to regain some of its old glory, his deep voice grew sweeter than it had ever been before, as he spoke of the happy time already gone, of that yet to come.

For a time Mr. Dunraven could not answer him. This look of brightness and joy, this recalling of happier days, only made the sad meeting still sadder, still harder to bear. When Mr. Dunraven, on seeing his son enter the room, had sprung forward to meet him, Conn had extended his hands, then, with a shudder, both had drawn back. They could look into each other's eyes, but they could not join hands, the iron bars kept them asunder, and the warder, who stood in the passage which divided the room in two, froze up, by his presence, any stream of passionate words which might have passed their lips.

Meanwhile Madge, standing in agony apart, watched with ever-increasing pain the faces of both father and son. One glance into Conn's face told her that he was a wretched broken-hearted man, that he had endured a trial for which nothing could compensate him, and that life would never again be to him what it once had been. As she acknowledged this she felt her heart contract with a dull pain. It was only another pang for her to bear, since it seemed she had not suffered enough already. Presently Conn, noting Madge's silence, turned to her with the ghost of his old fond manner, and held forth his hands.

'Madge,' he said softly, 'keep a good heart. Please God I shall soon be a free man, and then I'll make amends for the trouble I've brought to you all!'

His words cut Madge to the heart. She shrank away, but she could not answer him. She could not take the hand which he extended, but she felt her eyes growing dim with tears.

For a little longer they remained together, Madge and Mr. Dunraven looking wistfully into Conn's careworn face; then the warder announced that the time was up, and Conn was again put under custody to be taken back to his cell. In a dazed puzzled way Madge watched him go. She saw him almost forced through the door, away from his father's sight; she saw him turn his head to look back at her: then he was gone. She turned too: she took her uncle's arm, and the two left the gaol to rejoin George Aldyn, who still awaited them outside the prison-gates.

CHAPTER III.

"LET ME STAY WITH YOU TO-NIGHT, MADGE."

WHEN they appeared, George threw away the remnant of his cigar and went eagerly forward. He just glanced at Mr. Dunraven, who walked with his head hung low, then he looked at Madge. For one brief moment Madge's eyes met his; then they sought the ground. He took her hand, put it on his arm, and the three walked away together.

For that day the legal proceedings seemed to be at an end. The court had emptied itself, and the streets were even more crowded than they had been before. On either side of the way stood barrows and stands where coster-girls yelled out in praise of their goods; the brilliantly lit shops looked their brightest; lines of cabs and carriages hindered the traffic in the street.

Here and there crowds of gossiping men and women discussed the forthcoming cases, and those which had already been tried, some with haggard faces and eager eyes, others with the calmness born of the certainty of having no interest at stake. Drink was flowing about everywhere, and when at length Madge, still leaning on George Aldyn's arm, paused in the street near the inn, she found herself surrounded

by a circle of human faces, and heard in her ears a deafening roar.

George Aldyn urged her to hasten in. He was eager to get her safely into the inn; not on account of the crush at the door, but in case she should catch some of the remarks which he feared might pass from mouth to mouth. But it seemed to him that Madge guessed his motive, since, despite his pressing, he could not for a few moments get her to move. When at length he resolutely took her hand upon his arm and walked towards the door, they were surrounded on every hand by a gossiping crowd.

George walked on, pushing his way roughly through and clearing a space for Madge; but when they were within a few yards of the threshold, Madge's ears caught the mention of Conn's name, and

she resolutely paused to listen. Two young men stood on the pavement shaking hands.

'A murder case, isn't it?' said one.

'Yes, the case of that Irish lad who shot Lord Rigby!'

'How do you think it will end?'

'They'll hang him, of course!'

Madge listened in silence; but George Aldyn felt her hand grasp nervously at his arm. He took it in his right hand, put his left arm round her, and forced her to walk forward through the hall and up the stairs to her own room.

That night his presence there seemed unneeded, so, as soon as he conveniently could, he rose to take his leave.

'Good-night, uncle,' he said, giving Mr. Dunraven that title for the first time. 'I shall be here early in the morning, and we

will go to the court together. Don't leave the house until I come.'

And Mr. Dunraven, half indifferent, feeling only that in this hour of his great trouble it was something to have a guiding will at hand, bowed his head in silent consent.

Then George turned to Madge and held forth his hand. How cold the action seemed; and yet, what could he do? He could not obey his impulses now, for had he done so he would have folded her in his arms, laid her aching head upon his bosom, and whispered: 'Madge, my dear, have comfort, put your trust in me!' But all he did was to stand before her with his right hand extended and a formal 'Good-night, Madge,' upon his lips. But Madge did not take his hand; when she saw that he was really going, she too walked

towards the door, saying quietly, 'I will go with you just as far as the street-corner.'

She was only going to walk with him a few yards, yet no sooner had they crossed the threshold, than George took her hand and drew it through his arm. It was something to feel that he could do that without overstepping the limits allowed by a hazy kind of cousinship. He might be allowed to guide her footsteps, to look into her eyes, and press upon his arm her clay cold hand, if he could not strain her to his heart and cover her lips with kisses. Since they had left the house, Madge had not spoken a word; when they reached the corner of the street he took her hands in both of his.

'Good-night, Madge,' he whispered, and somehow the lowering of his voice seemed

to take the coldness from the words. 'You must get some rest quickly. Remember, you will have a trying ordeal to-morrow.'

He would have withdrawn his arm, but Madge's fingers closed firmly over it.

'Don't—don't go yet,' she said.

George Aldyn started.

There was such concentrated agony in her voice that it made him bend his head and look closely into her face, upon which the cold moonbeams played. There was neither a tear upon her cheek nor a quiver on her lip; her eyes looked large and lustrous, but in them there was such an expression of harrowing sorrow and mortal dread as pained her companion to the heart.

'Are you afraid to be left alone, Madge?' he asked.

'No.'

Her voice was quite steady now, but how ghastly pale her cheeks were!

'Because,' continued George, 'if you would rather, I will sleep to-night at the inn. As well do that as go to my quarters. I should be on the spot for the morning, too.'

He made a movement to turn and walk back to the inn, but Madge prevented him.

'No, no,' she said quickly. 'I do not want you to stay.'

So he paused again.

'Tell me,' continued Madge, raising her face resolutely to his, 'do you believe what that man said? Do you think Conn is in great danger?'

The words fell so clearly from her lips that they made her companion start

'It is impossible to tell until the trial is almost over,' he said.

He was glad that a thin veil of darkness then fell between them, for he dreaded to see the marks of pain upon her face.

'No, it is not impossible,' she persisted. 'You must hear what is said, and judge; and I must know, for I will not let them kill him. No,' she continued, as if communing with herself, 'God would not wish me to do that. If I said I knew, just to save Conn's life, God would pardon me; and if He did not, why I could die, and that would be better than killing Conn!'

She paused for a moment; then she continued:

'If Conn were to come to any harm, if he had even to bear the pain of being sentenced for that murder, I should never know a moment's happiness in all my life

again. My uncle's heart would break—it is nearly broken now. Yes, George, I know that; I have watched his hair turn grey with all this trouble, the wrinkles come into his face, and still I have not spoken; they all suffer, and I look on, and yet I looked at my head in the glass this morning and there was not a single grey hair!'

George Aldyn listened in wonder. Was she quite sane? he thought; or was all this trouble turning her brain?

'Madge,' he said, 'do you remember during the summer-time you used to talk to me about the divine ordering of things in this world—the blind trust we should all have in the beneficent power of an Almighty God?'

'Yes,' said Madge, quietly, 'I remember.'

'It is in times of trouble that our trust is tried,' he said. 'Madge, where is all your faith now?'

'You think it is all gone?' returned Madge, quietly. 'You think that because I have been made to suffer, I might be brought to deny my God? Well, you are wrong. If I had not had faith, I should never have let this go on—no, I should have set Conn free, and afterwards, perhaps, have lived on, a wretched, broken-hearted woman! But I have not spoken, because I thought that if I waited and prayed, God might end all this more mercifully than ever I could; and so I have waited and prayed.'

'And God has not heard?'

'I do not know,' said Madge, quietly; 'for still the trouble goes on, and, tell me, is it not blacker than ever against

Conn—are they not likely to find him guilty ?'

'Madge, Madge!' said George Aldyn, gazing into her face with strangely sorrowful eyes ; 'why do you ask *me* this question ? Why should *my* lips be for ever destined to give you pain ? Let me bring you a little comfort sometimes, Madge. My belief in the Almighty dwindles to nothing when I see *you* put to so much pain. Come, let me take you in,' he added, drawing her hand on his arm. 'This day has been too much for you; your brain is overwrought ; you want rest.'

But Madge stood firm.

'No,' she said, 'I cannot go in for a little while ; for my uncle will look up at me with those sorrowful eyes and perhaps kiss me, and I think that would break my heart to-night. You go home; do not wait

with me. I would rather stay here for a little while alone.'

Still he hesitated.

'You had better let me stay with you to-night, Madge.'

'No,' she said firmly; 'I will not. You have been very kind, and I am thankful to you, but do not linger here now.'

There was something so decided in her tone that her companion thought it better to obey her; so, without another word of protest, he bade her 'good-night,' and walked away.

'I shall be down by nine o'clock in the morning,' were his parting words: 'be ready, Madge.'

And Madge had quietly replied:

'Yes; do not be afraid; I will be ready.'

Then he left her.

He walked slowly up the street which led to his lodgings, his thick coat buttoned up, for the wind was keen, his hands thrust deep into his coat-pockets, his mind dwelling upon the conversation which he had just had.

'I did well to remind her of the existence of a God,' he said, with his old cynical laugh. 'Who better fitted for the task?—for up till a few days ago I had almost come to believe in One myself. Well, He does some good at all events. If Madge did not believe, or rather if she were less sensitively fashioned, endowed with less conscience or heart or soul, or whatever it may be termed, she would undoubtedly perjure herself in the witness-box before this trial is over, get some poor devil into a scrape, and save Conn. But

Madge won't do it—no, but if Conn is sentenced to death—as I fear he will be—the shock will either kill her or turn her brain. Oh, Madge, Madge! is this the will of your all-beneficent God? Isn't it enough to make a man blaspheme? Yet such things take place every day of our lives, and still the world goes on!'

For some time he walked about lost in thought; suddenly he turned and quickly retraced his steps; but when he reached the spot where he had left Madge, he found that she was gone.

The door of the inn still stood open, and one or two figures lingered outside; but he saw that there was a bright light burning in the parlour, and in Madge's bedroom just above.

'Thank God,' he said unconsciously, using a common formula; 'she has

taken my advice and gone to rest. Ah well, she will need it, poor child! for who knows what the morrow may bring forth!'

CHAPTER IV.

WATCHING.

AS soon as George Aldyn had left her, Madge quietly retraced her steps, and, entering the inn, crept unseen up to her room. It was quite dark up there, so she lit a candle, the one the light of which George had seen, and, sitting down upon the side of the bed, leaned her head upon her hands and tried to think.

'What shall I do—what shall I do?'

she exclaimed at length, fixing her wild eyes upon the crucified Christ which hung from the chain at her side. 'O God, what have I done that I should be made to suffer all this? They will question me soon, and what shall I say? I cannot let Conn be killed—I cannot quite break my uncle's heart. Oh, if I could see some way out of it all, I would not care if the next moment I had to die!'

She sank upon her knees, and rested her forehead upon the cold counterpane of the bed.

'How my head burns!' she said. 'I wonder if I am going mad? I feel to-night as if I could not think, it is all so confused, and yet there are only a few hours left; and I *must* think—I must force myself to devise something.'

She knelt thus for about half an hour

longer; then, with a shuddering sigh, she arose. Suddenly remembering that her uncle sat in the parlour alone, she descended the stairs, and, entering the parlour, sat down in her favourite attitude on a stool at his feet.

At the sound of her footstep in the room, Mr. Dunraven raised his head and looked blankly and hopelessly into her face. Madge could not return the look, but she took his thin hand between her own, and, bending her head, kissed it. Suddenly it was withdrawn, and Mr. Dunraven, burying his face in both his hands, burst into tears.

It is a terrible thing to see a strong man weep, but it is tenfold more pitiful when the hair is white, and the once powerful form is drooping with the sorrow of years. To Madge these tears were dreadful, not

pitiful as they would have been had they fallen from a woman's eyes, but dreadful, for they seemed to bring with them the assurance that the last lingering hope had fled.

'Oh, uncle, don't do that!' she cried desperately; 'I cannot bear it!'

But for a time Mr. Dunraven could not raise his head. His body was convulsed and shaken like a tree by the breath of the storm; and when at last the violence of his grief abated, he kept his eyes half shaded as if he were ashamed.

'Madge darling,' he said, 'don't mind me. The sight of that poor boy has been too much for me, that's all. Almighty God has been too hard upon us, mavourneen; and it all began the day we put poor Clara under ground and came away to England. I don't mind for myself. I'm getting an

old man, and my life's well-nigh spent, but it's hard for my poor boy.'

As Madge listened, her heart seemed to grow lighter. It was something to hear him speak, far better than to see him looking at her hour after hour, day after day, with those patient, pitiful eyes. She sat for a time looking into the fire; then suddenly she turned towards her uncle. How grim and old he looked! This trouble seemed to have added ten years to his life. She fell upon her knees before him, clasped his trembling hand, and raised her white face to his.

'Uncle Patrick,' she said quietly, 'do not blame me too much. I have made you suffer, God knows; but indeed I will save Conn, even if it breaks my heart.'

Mr. Dunraven started and looked at her, and for a moment he thought, as

George Aldyn had thought, that she was scarcely sane. So he only patted her head, and said quietly:

'Don't *you* talk like that, mavourneen; that wouldn't save Conn, and I should be left alone!'

Madge said no more, but presently, when the servant came in with tea, she noticed the strange look there was in Madge's eyes. She noticed, too, that instead of taking the tea which was brought to her, she poured out some wine and drank it down; then she kissed her uncle very fondly, and saying she was very tired, went up to her room.

A couple of hours later, when Mr. Dunraven ascended the stairs, he paused to listen at her door. There was not a sound.

'She is fast asleep, poor darling!' he

said, and he went off sadly to try and drown his sorrow in sleep too.

But Madge was not asleep. She heard him ascend the stairs and pause at the door of her room. As he did so, she held her breath. Then he passed on—the sound of his foot-steps died; the door of his room closed, and the key turned in the lock.

'Thank God he is gone to bed at last,' she said, with a sigh.

She sat for about a quarter of an hour longer; then she re-lit her candle, since her return the room had been in total darkness. Her face was still pale as death, and that strange light in her eyes had grown deeper and deeper; her hand trembled slightly, and now and then a cold breath seemed to chill her to the heart. Presently she opened her window, and, leaning upon the sill, looked out]

It was past twelve o'clock; the inn had ejected its inmates, and these apparently had sought their homes, for no one lingered in the street. Now and then there came to her the sound of voices, but soon these too died away, and all became quite still.

She had been thinking of what she must do: her plans were only half formed, yet already they turned her heartsick. If popular prejudice seemed to be going against Conn, it but remained for her to speak. Speak! Would she ever be able to speak and break the solemn oath which she had taken before God? would it not be better for her to set the proper people on the murderer's track, and to have him brought forth to seal, with his own lips, his own wretched doom?

As she thought of this, a vision of the wild famished face again rose before her,

and she closed her eyes as if to drive the sight away.

The vision faded, but as it did so there rose before her sight another, which seemed to rend her heart still more. It was a vision of that night when she had first beheld the man. First she seemed to see him crouching beneath the thick-foliaged hedge where he had crept for shelter from the storm; then, with outstretched arms and piteous cries, he had rushed to their door to find there protection for his famished body, food for his starving lips. And once again he had come. How well Madge remembered that night when the murderer had found her in the house alone. How wild and terrible his face had looked as he held forth the cross for her trembling lips to kiss. And she had kissed it and sworn, knowing not what she did!

With a clangour of sound which broke harshly the silence of the sleeping town, the clock chimed forth two. How fast the night was slipping away! There was no moon, but myriads of stars shed a dim lustre on the sleeping earth—which seemed so peaceful, yet so sad.

As every hour went by the air seemed to grow more chilly: sometimes Madge shivered, but it was not with cold; the touch of the frozen air was grateful to her parched lips and feverishly burning brow. She looked up at the starlit heavens, and for the first time in her life she thought:

'If there is an Almighty God, why does He let such things be?'

She had been born of a God-fearing race, reared in a God-fearing school: and up till now her faith had been absolute. But now she began to wonder if it could

be possible that George Aldyn was right when he had laughed at the idea of carrying out minutely the precepts of Christianity, and had counselled her to believe in the beneficence of God, only so long as that belief did not interfere with her earthly welfare. His ideas had made her shrink from him at first, now they turned her heartsick. If they were true, if man had been born but to live a selfish life and die a dog's death, where was the use of life at all? and if they were false, how came it that most good deeds brought with them so much woe?

There was Mr. Aldyn—a worldly man, a hypocrite who was content to preach Christianity and live by the sordid principles which his son was frank enough to uphold — prosperous and happy; while naught but sorrow seemed to stop at Mr.

Dunraven's door. And she — she had wished to lead a useful and a blameless life—to carry out, as far as lay in her power, the creed which all good Christians were taught to hold by—and, through doing a Christian deed, she had been the means of bringing upon the house the bitterest woe of all. It seemed to her that George Aldyn had been right—the pity of it was that she had not been guided by his advice. He had spoken a prophecy when he had said:

'If you want to solve the problem of life and regenerate the world, you'll simply be a martyr—a little speck swallowed up in the great abyss of human woes!'

She had not heeded his words, and now this was the end.

'God help me!' she cried, stretching forth her hands towards the great black

shadow somewhere in the midst of which she knew her cousin lay. 'Oh, Conn, Conn! forgive me, for I have caused it all! Oh, how I wish I had shut the gate on the wretched man that night! I called you out to save his life, and now—God help me—he is making me take yours!'

How bitterly cold the air was growing! Madge felt now that her hands and face were quite numb. The clock had chimed forth five—the stars still shone brightly—the streets were still as silent as the grave . . . silent, yes, but not quite deserted: as she moved to fold her trembling arms around her, she suddenly became conscious that her gaze was met by another. On the opposite side of the street stood a man, his face suffused in bright moonlight, his body dimly illumined by the flickering light of the stars. The face was turned

towards Madge. It was that of an old man, with snow-white hair and beard. As her eyes met his she trembled violently, for something in that intent look startled her. She looked again, but as she did so the face was gradually withdrawn into the shadow, and faded away.

CHAPTER V.

THE FIRST DAY.

DURING that night George Aldyn's sleep was troubled; when the clock struck seven he awoke, strangely agitated and unrefreshed, and, dressing himself quickly, but with his usual care, went downstairs. Most of the members of the household were still sleeping; they were not likely to be astir for another couple of hours. But the servants were just up, and soon after

George entered the breakfast-room, his cup of coffee was brought in to him. Before he took it, he opened the window and put out his head and shoulders to ascertain what sort of a day it was.

'Bitterly cold,' he said, closing the window again, and crossing the room to take his favourite place on the hearth-rug; 'far too cold for Madge, poor child, to hang about that wretched court-house. I shall try and persuade her to rest quietly at the inn until she is wanted to give her evidence.'

He sat down to take his breakfast; before he had finished, he was compelled to light the gas; the fog, which had been hovering threateningly above the town since daybreak, having now descended like a cloud, bringing with it an ominous and unnatural darkness. When at length

George Aldyn issued into the street, he experienced a good deal of difficulty in finding his way. All the lamps were lit, but the fog was so dense as to resist the rays of light, so that only a small space around the lamps was clear. However, after some trouble, he reached the inn, and presented himself before Mr. Dunraven and Madge, considerably earlier than the time appointed for their meeting.

He found them both ready; Mr. Dunraven pacing the room as if impatient to be gone, Madge standing by the window, looking with weary eyes upon the black and silent street.

What a night she had passed—and yet how she had dreaded the coming of dawn! Sometimes she had cast herself, dressed as she was, upon the bed, and slept; only to awaken more feverishly agitated than she

had been before; and now the traces of her hours of weary watching were strongly marked upon her face. She had shed no tears; her pain was too great to be relieved by weeping, and on her face, which was as white as death, there was a fixed look of resolve. To George Aldyn's request that she should remain at the inn until her presence at the court was actually needed, she gave a positive refusal. If she were not allowed to go straight into the court and hear what was said and watch what was done, she would at least have the satisfaction of keeping close to the door. So as soon as it was time, the three left the inn together and made their way slowly, through the still thickening fog, towards the court. George Aldyn had delayed as long as possible, and when at length the three arrived at the door,

it was about time for the trial to begin.

The court, a very small and uncomfortable chamber, was crammed to suffocation. There was not a vacant seat to be had anywhere, and the people who had been unable to gain admittance were thronging about the doors. Rows of fashionably dressed ladies, belonging to the best county families, and in some cases related to members of the bar, sat with their opera-glasses, smelling-bottles, and lace handkerchiefs before them, occupying the gallery, and amusing themselves while waiting by nodding and smiling to their acquaintances who were jammed together in the body of the court below. Here and there a girl, famed for her pretty looks, might be seen sitting sedately among the barristers, while one or two of the most distinguished

visitors had been accommodated with seats near to the judge's bench. The judge's chair and footstool were of bright crimson velvet, while behind the back of the chair hung a square of faded scarlet cloth, embroidered with gold, bearing, also in gold, the royal arms and the words '*Dieu et mon droit.*'

By the time George Aldyn and the Dunravens arrived at their destination, the barristers were already in their places, the judge was about to take his seat upon the bench, and the order had already been given to place the prisoner in the dock.

After taking a cursory glance around the court to ascertain how matters stood, George Aldyn returned to the room where he had left Mr. Dunraven and Madge. It was a cold, whitewashed chamber, leading out of the corridor of the court: it had

been prepared as a waiting-room for the witnesses; already it contained John Scott, the late Lord Rigby's keeper, as well as the under-keeper, whose evidence was so strong against the prisoner. Madge had taken a seat beside the fire, while Mr. Dunraven, who had walked over to the window, was gazing wearily forth as if at the thickening fog.

A sharp shock was in store for them.

The door of the room was open; Madge heard a clanking of chains and turning of locks; and suddenly a group of men, with Conn among them, passed along the corridor of the court. She leapt up with a cry; Mr. Dunraven sprang wildly to the door, and stretched forth his trembling hands towards his son.

Despite the urging of his escort, Conn paused. He wore heavy handcuffs, and

was closely guarded by the prison warders. As his eyes fell upon George Aldyn his face flushed slightly, and he held his handcuffed hands low as if to hide the iron bands. His face was pale and very careworn, but he tried to smile as he spoke a hurried word to his father and looked into Madge's eyes. The interview lasted but a moment; then the chains clanked again, the door of the court swung open, closed, and he was gone.

The situation had been but shadowy before; it had now become real, and already Madge felt how much more tragic the reality was going to be. With a vague sense of hopeless dread stealing over her, she sat down before the fire and gazed at the burning ashes in the grate, and listened feverishly to every sound. Now and then the door of the court swung open, and as

it did so, she heard the murmuring of voices; that buzz, and stir, and bustle, which told her that the trial was going on. As she sat so, listening, watching, and waiting, she heard her uncle's name called out, and she saw him, with bowed grey head and trembling form, leave the room to go into the court.

When Mr. Dunraven was gone, George Aldyn drew forth a pocket flask, filled its cup with sherry, and held it forth.

'Taste this, Madge,' he said, lowering his voice to that soft whisper which of late he had been accustomed to use whenever he addressed her. 'Your name may be called next, and you are not in a fit state to go into the box. You may trust me, he added, seeing her hesitate. 'I know better than you what is good for you: why, your cheek has grown paler at the very

thought of going in. Remember, you must speak up for Conn; it will never do to have you ill.'

So Madge, quietly submissive at the mention of Conn's name, allowed him to wet her lips with the wine. But her turn did not come yet awhile. Indeed, it was George Aldyn himself who was first summoned. He quickly handed his flask to Madge; begged his uncle, who had returned to the room looking greyer and older than ever, to make free use of it, and, with one last assuring whisper, passed through the swinging door into the court.

Within the court it was oppressively warm, and the whole air seemed full of half-suppressed excitement. Inside the dock stood Conn, his head bowed, his manacled hands hung low as if he were still trying to hide them; but his face,

though rather pale and sad, wearing its look of physical power and beauty. On either side of him, looking by contrast positively hideous and repulsive, sat a stout warder, carefully watchful and grimly cold. The counsel was flushed with his own eloquence, the judge was blinking with owl-like interest down into the dock, and the ladies were fluttering about like doves before a storm.

When George Aldyn stepped into the box he at once felt himself an object of popular interest. He was young and tolerably good-looking, of graceful manners and good address, besides being a rector's son and cousin to the prisoner. Immediately hundreds of eyes were fixed upon him, just as they had been fixed upon the prisoner several hours before; opera-glasses were levelled at him and whispered com-

ments went from mouth to mouth. But George Aldyn was fully equal to the situation. He gazed around him with a cool, calm glance, while he slowly and deliberately pulled off his right-hand glove; then having taken the oath, he waited for the counsel to begin.

His evidence was short but to the point, and certainly did not tell against the prisoner if it could not save him. He certainly had, he said, met Conn on the night of the murder, and he had on that occasion been carrying a gun, but then he had met him similarly equipped many times before. He was the heir to an Irish estate; he was fond of sport, and had got Lord Rigby's permission to shoot rabbits in any of his rabbit warrens. Consequently he often went about armed. Lord Rigby had been an intimate friend

of the rector and himself, and he would be sure to know if enmity existed between his lordship and his cousin. None did exist. Conn certainly was a gentleman both by birth and education, greatly esteemed in his own country, and very highly thought of both by his father, the rector of Armstead, and by himself.

At this point, George spoke in terms so laudatory that Conn himself looked up amazed.

It was certainly the first intimation he had ever got that he was held in even decent esteem by his cousin. He had always believed that their feelings towards each other had been mutual, and he had never tried to conceal the sovereign contempt in which he held this conceited young man, physically so much his inferior, who pandered to all the degraded

vices of a society at which he affected to scoff. Was he scoffing still? Conn looked up, half expecting to meet that cold sarcastic smile which he had so often seen hovering about his cousin's mouth, and which he had learned to detest. It was not there. The young man's manner was thoroughly calm and self-possessed, but his face was very grave, and his voice sympathetically soft.

'After all,' thought Conn, 'perhaps he's a good fellow.' And as George stepped from the witness-box, Conn again hung his head and relapsed into his former state of inanition.

CHAPTER VI.

ROSAMOND BEARS WITNESS.

THE trial proceeded. Three clever counsel, each unrivalled in his special line of business, worked their hardest; but alas! each step seemed to take them deeper and deeper into the maze of circumstantial evidence. The case was beginning to look very black indeed.

The principal witness for the prosecution seemed to be the young under-keeper who,

on the night of the murder, had met Conn wandering alone on the preserved portions of the Rigby estate, and, having addressed him, had grown curious, through the peculiarity of his manner, and had consequently taken upon himself the task of watching him.

During the severe cross-examination to which this young fellow was subjected, he confessed that for some time he had regarded Conn with suspicion. On several occasions he had followed and watched him; he had seen him hanging about the lawns which stretched around Rigby Castle, watching the doors and windows of the Castle, and on each of these occasions he had carried a gun beneath his arm. Conn started when he heard this, and, raising his head, cast at the man a wild, half-imploring look as if expecting more, but nothing more

came. This look of fear and intensity was not unnoticed by the jury, and it told against the prisoner. Even George Aldyn, who, after returning to Madge, had, at her request, come back to watch the case, wondered what it meant. Could it possibly be that Conn was guilty—in that case what had been his motive? That was the mystery to him.

When Conn had looked up at the witness, he had not thought of the effect his strange manner might produce upon those who were chosen to decide his fate; he had merely been seized with a wild wonder if this man had witnessed his passionate interviews with Rosamond Leigh.

And now he began to wonder what Rosamond herself could think of all this. She knew he had not committed murder, for when the gun had been fired which had

shot down Lord Rigby, had he not been holding her in his arms and kissing her tremulous lips? Thoughts such as these had filled Conn's brain ever since that morning when he had sat powerless and seen the black flag waving above Rigby Castle; when he had been dragged away from Armstead, and cast into Gresham Gaol.

Since that eventful night when the two had parted in the wood, he had never seen Rosamond, and scarcely heard the mention of her name. He knew that by speaking out the truth, and implicating the girl, he could save his own life, but he preferred to remain silent; he wanted to see how she would act in the matter.

Did he doubt Rosamond's kindness? Scarcely, though at times the memory of those words which she had uttered on the

night of their last meeting caused him strange uneasiness. She had spoken of a long separation, she had even hinted at the possibility of her marrying another man. Could it be possible that she had been in earnest when she spoke so, or had she done it merely to test his love? She had spoken earnestly; in all probability she had felt over-excited, and did not know very well what she was saying. At all events he would not doubt her yet. Why should he do so? had she not proved her goodness in a thousand ways? and, now that the single obstacle to their union was removed, now that Lord Rigby was dead, there would be no longer any necessity to keep the truth concealed.

And yet it was strange, he thought, that she had made no sign; stranger still that she should have left so long unanswered

the letter which he wrote to her from the prison-cell. He had heard from his father that Rigby Castle was now in the possession of the new lord, that Rosamond still dwelt there, that she possessed, through the late Lord Rigby's will, ten thousand pounds, besides many valuable family jewels. She was, in Conn's eyes, an heiress now, perfect mistress of her own actions; and yet she had neither written nor come to him. Even such conduct as this, unaccountable as it appeared to him, did not shake his faith in her altogether. There was doubtless, he argued, some strong reason for her silence; she was only biding her time. Perhaps she did not wish their secret meetings to be exposed unnecessarily, but, if there came to be any need for it, she would step forward and speak the truth.

It will be seen, therefore, that Conn never once entertained the possibility of a tragic ending to this trouble of the trial. If ever his thoughts tended that way, they always ended in a vision of a ministering angel, with Rosamond's lovely face and form, stepping forward at the last moment and taking him by the hand.

While he stood thus, thinking of all these things, and listening in a vague, dreamy way to the evidence, he was suddenly brought to his senses by the counsel ordering a witness to step down, and giving the order to 'Call Miss Rosamond Leigh.'

He started and trembled from head to foot.

The name of 'Miss Rosamond Leigh' went from mouth to mouth, causing a strange commotion in court. The ladies settled themselves more comfortably in

their seats, and prepared their opera-glasses; the gentlemen craned their necks and began to look interested, and Conn, with a flush upon his cheek and a sparkle in his eye, pulled himself together and stood up like a man.

In a moment his passion for Rosamond boiled up in all his veins, and he almost hated himself to think that he had ever once allowed his heart to doubt her. Was not her coming there that day a deed worthy of her—a deed which would make him love and revere her a thousandfold. Ah, God! how he loved her now! Was it not through his love for her that he was suffering so? Had he mentioned her name, had he told of that one secret meeting, he might then have been a free man. He had feared by one breath of slander to sully her fair name, so he had said

nothing. But, he said to himself, it was worth the waiting to see her come forward at last, and before all the world proclaim the whole truth. He should owe his life to *her;* what a sweet debt!—a debt which he would labour all his days to repay!

When at length the door of the court swung open and Rosamond entered, Conn, fixing his excited eyes upon her face, felt a sudden pang of pity. How miserably ill she looked! Her cheeks were like alabaster, and her eyes were dim with tears. She wore deep mourning; but as she walked into court, leaning on the arm of the successor of the late Lord Rigby, she seemed to fill the air with that faint delicious perfume which Conn had learned to know so well.

The ladies in the court fixed their opera-

glasses upon her; the gentlemen stared with undisguised admiration for the pale, beautiful, Madonna-like girl, who was so stately and yet so winning, so doubly charming in her bitter grief.

She entered the court with her eyes fixed steadily on the ground. Lord Rigby conducted her to the witness-box, and, as she entered it, her eye fell upon George Aldyn who stood near. She bowed gravely; her pallor increased, then suddenly she flushed from throat to temple.

The first few questions put to her were trivial enough, and Rosamond answered them straightforwardly, but with a strange tremor in her voice. She and the late Lord Rigby had dined alone on the eventful evening, and since that moment when she had left the dinner-table to

retire to her own room she had never beheld him alive.

Here Rosamond's eyes filled with tears, and the counsel paused for a moment to allow her emotion to subside.

'Did she know the prisoner?' was the next question, and, without once looking at Conn, she replied:

'Yes, she had met him several times.'

Then, as the examination and cross-examination continued, it came out that while walking on the estate she had several times seen him armed with gun or fishing-rod; twice she had interrupted quarrels between him and Scott, Lord Rigby's head-keeper; which proves, agreed the counsel, that the prisoner is a man of very violent temper.

'When you retired to your room on the night of the murder,' asked the counsel at

length, 'did you remain there the whole evening, Miss Leigh ?'

This was coming very near the point indeed. Rosamond's pallor increased to such an extent that for a moment she seemed about to faint. But it was only for a moment. She grasped the box firmly with her left hand, and, after a moment's hesitation, answered steadily enough.

'No; I went for a walk in the grounds.'

'Ah ! and during that walk did you encounter any one ?—did you see anything of the prisoner ?'

During all this examination a hundred phases of emotion had passed over Conn's face. First he had felt his heart bound with eagerness to meet her, then he had shrank back and tried to hide his hands for

very shame. Again he had felt pained that she should keep her eyes so studiously turned away. He had chafed impatiently through the long trivial examination, waiting for the question—the answer to which was, he believed, destined to set him free. The question had come. In a very short time now he might be a free man, walking out of court with her whom he loved beside him. The thought was intoxicating. Conn cast a glance of bold defiance round the court, and looked at the handcuffs upon his hands as if they had no longer any right to be there.

For a moment Rosamond paused, pale and silent, and during that moment what an array of thoughts passed through her burning brain! Had *he* told; did they suspect; had any one seen her that night? If he had told she could deny it, and since

there had been no witnesses they would believe her; but then, her conscience whispered, it would go harder than ever with Conn.

At last the counsel, thinking she had not heard, repeated his question.

'Did you see anything of the prisoner on the night of the murder?'

She raised her bright blue eyes and looked calmly at him, and, without changing colour this time, answered quietly:

'No!'

The little word, uttered so softly, fell ominously on the silence of the court. Conn staggered back as if he had got a blow, and for a moment thought himself mistaken. As if to make it certain, the counsel repeated the question.

'You did *not* encounter the prisoner?'

'No,' answered Rosamond, more clearly this time.

Having once taken the plunge, she felt more confidence.

Then, for the first time, she looked across at Conn, and their eyes met. As they did so, the girl shuddered.

'If he should ever get free,' she said to herself, 'he will kill me for this!'

But the counsel was questioning again, and again she had to reply.

After a few more unimportant questions the prisoner's counsel in cross-examination returned to the old theme, as if to give her one last chance of justifying herself.

'You are quite sure you did not meet the prisoner on the night of the murder?'

'Have I not said so?'

'You were not in the habit of meeting him by night?'

She flushed up with a look of indignant scorn.

'Certainly not!'

'Then beyond these one or two occasions of which you have spoken, you never met him in secret?'

'Never!'

Conn was not looking at her now; as the last firm denial fell from her lips, he shuddered to the quick; an ominous murmur ran through the court.

Rosamond's evidence closed the proceedings for that day. As she stepped down from the witness-box the town-clock chimed four. The judge rose from the bench, there was a general movement in the court, and the warders closed around the prisoner to conduct him back to his cell.

At this moment Rosamond, looking

ghastly pale now and trembling violently, glanced across at Conn ; not voluntarily, but as if by some magic influence ; her gaze was drawn to his face, and again their eyes met. As they did so the girl shuddered, and seemed about to faint ; but Lord Rigby was beside her, and slipping her trembling hand through his arm, she hurried out of the building.

Five minutes before Rosamond's evidence had closed, George Aldyn had returned to the room where he had left Madge. Mr. Dunraven, who had passed the whole day in rushing in and out of the court, now came up, and George proposed that the three should hasten away without loss of time.

'There will be a terrible crush presently, he said, 'and, if we linger, we shall find it

difficult to push our way to the door. Miss Leigh is about to leave the witness-box, and when she does so, the court will rise. Come, I have a cab at the door: the very best thing we can do is to hurry away!'

While uttering the last words he had cast his eyes eagerly round the waiting-room: he now turned them again towards Mr. Dunraven, and asked quickly:

'Why, uncle, where is Madge?'

'Madge?—I don't know.'

'But haven't you seen her?'

'No, not since the lawyers came back from their dinner, and we left her in that room!'

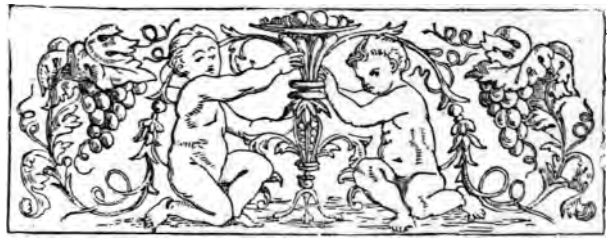
But she was not in the room now; so George, taking his uncle by the arm, went to look for her outside. Here the crush was terrible; all through the day the eager

crowd had been increasing, and now more people, eager to get a sight of the witnesses, barristers, and judge, came up to swell the throbbing mass of life.

The fog had cleared off a good deal by this time, but the shadows of night had begun to fall. The glaring lamplight flashed down into that sea of human faces, illuminating it dimly. George Aldyn pushed his way roughly amidst the crowd, and searched every face in vain.

'She must have gone back to the inn,' he said to Mr. Dunraven, as the two entered the cab and hurried away. He tried to speak calmly, but he was beginning to feel very uneasy; and so, as soon as the cab stopped at the door of the inn, he leapt out and asked at once if Miss Dunraven had returned. No one had seen her.

Mr. Dunraven, now violently excited, rushed up the stairs, and searched every room. But Madge was nowhere to be found.



CHAPTER VII.

PURSUIT.

UP till the hour of luncheon that day, George Aldyn had made a point of coming out of court occasionally to report proceedings and ascertain if he could do anything for Madge. The twenty minutes allowed for luncheon he had spent by her side; but as soon as the court re-assembled, and the trial went on, Madge begged him to go back and remain in the court until

the day's proceedings were entirely over.

'If you will stay in,' she said, 'and afterwards tell me truthfully how things are going on, I shall not mind so much being obliged to wait outside.'

So at two o'clock George took a permanent place in the court, and left Madge sitting beside the waiting-room fire.

She was quite alone.

The witnesses, whose evidence had been heard, had taken up a position in the court, while those whose evidence was yet to come, were either strolling about the corridors or mixing with the eager crowd without.

Madge remained quietly in her seat.

The room had grown a good deal brighter since the morning: the densest of the fog had cleared away, but enough

still lingered to darken the place and necessitate the use of gas. Several jets burnt, bringing out in bright relief Madge's black dress, and pale, careworn face. Past and future were blanks to her now; the thought of one she abhorred, the thought of the other she dreaded; the dreary hum of voices came to her: she listened to the sounds dreamily, as if they reached her in sleep.

It was still bitterly cold without, but the air of the room was fast becoming stifling. When George Aldyn left her, closing the door behind him, Madge, feeling very cold, had drawn up her chair quite near to the fire. Suddenly she felt that her dress was scorching, and she rose to move away.

She rose, half turned, then tottered back and fell again into her seat. A cry rose to

her lips: she suppressed it, but an electric thrill passed over her body and left her tremulous and cold.

Was she dreaming or awake? or were her senses befooling her? No, it was no delusion. As she rose to push her chair away, her eyes sought the window, as already they had done a dozen times that day; and there, pressed against the glass, its eyes steadfastly bent on her, was the same face which she had seen the night before gazing up from the darkened street.

The same, yet different. The features were there; the beard and snow-white hair, but as she met those eyes, which were now so steadfastly bent upon her, she remembered the fierce light which had flamed upon her twice before, and in a moment she seemed to recognise the man.

They gazed steadily at one another, then the man drooped his eyes and moved away.

At first sight of him, Madge had sunk back again upon her seat; now she rose, rushed towards the door, and, without a moment's reflection, plunged into the midst of the crowd which surrounded the court.

From first to last the business had lasted but a moment; she now stood, gazing helplessly about her, hustled on every side by the people, wondering, for the first time, what she must do.

What with the fog and the fast fading away of daylight, it was impossible for her to see distinctly, save where the flickering rays of the lamplight fell. By the aid of this light she searched every face keenly, until her eyes rested upon the one she sought.

Again Madge started: again she thought that during that brief moment when her eyes had met those eyes at the window, her senses had deceived her, and she had conjured up a likeness of the face which she was so eager to behold. The eyes were not looking at her now, but she could see the face and figure distinctly, and in neither of these could she trace any resemblance to the person she sought. She saw an old man, enfeebled even beyond his years, dressed in the tattered garments of a beggar, with a face wrinkled and wan, surrounded by straggling locks of snow-white hair, while a long unkempt white beard rested on his chest. He was so feeble that he had to lean upon a staff.

With tears of disappointment dimming her eyes, and her soul more saddened than before, she was about to return to her seat

beside the waiting-room fire, when suddenly the man's eyes, wandering over the crowd, again met hers, and she stood rooted to the spot.

She was not dreaming; she had not been deceived; there, in a transparent disguise, stood the man for whose guilt Conn Dunraven was even then in danger of being sentenced to death.

Madge did not cry out this time, nor indeed did she betray by a single look the fact that she knew the man. After that one brief glance of recognition, she allowed her eyes to wander aimlessly from one to another of the faces which were gathered about her; then, when the man had turned away, she contrived to keep herself concealed, and watched him.

For a long time he kept amidst the densest of the crowd, and for a period as

long, Madge remained in the shadow attentively watching him. He wandered about slowly, with his head bowed, his eyes glancing furtively at the doors of the court; once he returned to the waiting-room window and gazed in: then he looked around him as if searching for a form amidst the crowd. Madge kept well hidden. She knew that he was looking for *her*.

It was growing late; some of the fog still hung about the street, and the daylight had almost faded. The crowd, which had been increasing hour by hour, was now so great that it was with difficulty Madge held her place at all.

A carriage, with flashing lamps, dashed up to the court-door, cabs began to congregate, policemen exerted themselves to disperse the throng. The proceedings for

that day would soon be over: Mr. Dunraven and George Aldyn would then come out of court. Up till this, Madge had forgotten all about them: she now dreaded lest they should come out and find her there.

But her fears were premature. When the police arrived, and the cabs began to congregate, the man pulled his hat lower down over his eyes, and, withdrawing from the crowd, made his way into the more deserted streets of the town.

Madge, keeping at a safe distance, followed him. What she was going to do she did not exactly know. She was too excited to think. Had she obeyed her impulse, she would have sprang forward and seized him. One moment's reflection told her this would be folly. Her strength was nothing to his. She would simply be flung aside, as once before she had been,

and he would disappear, perhaps this time for ever.

So she walked on stealthily in his steps, keeping her cloak wrapped well about her, and hanging her head to hide her face from the gaze of any passer-by.

Once or twice some drunken ruffian accosted her; and she trembled lest a disturbance would disclose her presence to the man; but when she passed silently on, no one followed her.

Whither she went she did not know. The ways were all strange to her; she looked neither to the right nor the left. Faint sounds came to her from the busy streets, which were by this time crammed with people to whom the winter assizes brought dissipation and fun. The inns which she passed were very full; before the doors travelling musicians played and sang.

How Madge's mind misgave her! how faint and cold grew her fluttering heart as she looked and listened! Wherever she turned her eyes, some fresh sight was sure to sicken her. There were the boys with the evening papers, containing a full account of that day's trial; there was a book to be sold for a penny, containing a graphic account of the murder, with a picture of the spot where the crime was committed, and speaking likenesses of the murderer and the murdered man; while at another street-corner a full-sized sheet was displayed, on which was imprinted the interior of the court, with a hideous likeness of Conn standing guarded and handcuffed in the dock, and the dignitaries of the law, all equally murderous-looking, grouped on every hand.

At last, to Madge's infinite relief, they

passed out of these thoroughfares and left the street-cries behind them. For a while they came to her ears, growing each time fainter and fainter as she walked on; then they were entirely drowned by another sound—a sound which seemed to flood her being with new hope and make her beating heart grow calm. It was the full rich sound of an organ, and it came through an open church-door.

The church stood on their right, its doors thrown wide, its painted windows illuminated, its floor occupied by a congregation whose voices suddenly burst forth to mingle with the music and offer up a hymn to God.

Before the open door of the church, the man had paused: now he went quietly forward, and, with bowed head and clasped hands, sat down near the threshold.

They were holding a special evening service within. When the hymn was finished, and the congregation had re-seated themselves, only a dull hum came through the church-door. The man sat like one in a trance, making no sound at all.

Presently the deep tones of the organ pealed forth again. The man raised his head. How haggard and wild his form looked! and to Madge, who was watching him keenly from a darkened corner of the street, it seemed to tremble with pain! Once his hands were lifted, then they fell heavily to his side.

In another moment Madge would have stepped forward and placed her hand upon his arm; but just then the church beadle came to the door, and, seeing the form upon the threshold, ordered him away.

Without a word the man rose, and again pulling his hat low down over his eyes and buttoning his old coat around him, passed silently from the church-door down the lonely street.

CHAPTER VIII.

RUN TO EARTH.

MADGE still followed.

She was trembling violently now, and growing somewhat afraid: not of the drunken revellers who now congregated at almost every street-corner, making night hideous with their oaths and cries, and hustling her roughly as she went by; but of the man himself, who glided on with cat-like tread before her down the darkened side of the street,

and constantly turned his face from the gaze of those who happened to pass him by.

Where was he going? to what wretched haunt was this wandering likely to lead? She could not help asking herself these questions as she gazed at the dreary streets through which they passed.

The evening was now well advanced, but, though the wind still blew bitterly, the sky had grown clear. On either side of the street the lamps cast down their faint flickering light, and by it Madge was now enabled to note the road they took. At every step she grew more and more suspicious, for she felt that she was passing rapidly out of the respectable streets into slums where vice festers and grows fetid, past dens the doors of which are ever open to receive the human refuse which clings about every town.

The streets were narrow and long. Dishevelled and dirty women hung about the doorways; ragged children played in the gutters, and repeated with their baby lips the foul language of their elders; brutal ruffians of men came striding along to their homes, and these sometimes accosted Madge as she went by. Had there been less fatal issues at stake, Madge would have turned her steps; it was the thought of Conn, as she had seen him that morning, which lent her courage, which impelled her to walk steadily forward and keep upon the track of the man.

Presently they passed into the worst slum of all.

A narrow street, with wretched tumble-down dwellings on either side. There were few people about, but those who did linger seemed by their appearance to be

creatures of the wretchedest kind. All was quiet, but shattered doors and broken windows gave evidence of the scenes which often occurred. Once here, the man slackened his steps: he paused before the most dilapidated-looking dwelling in the street, crossed the dark threshold, and disappeared.

Madge paused now and stood irresolute.

To follow him seemed impossible: she must creep into the shadow and watch. Minutes passed: he did not return. Several figures, both male and female, had passed in and out of the house. She watched still: the man did not come. It was evident to Madge that he was housed for the night.

In order to meet him face to face, she must boldly enter the house too. The very thought made her tremble and un-

consciously shrink further back into the shadow of the wall. Around her at every doorstep were groups of men and women, whose language terrified her, whose very presence filled her soul with disgust. How was she to pass through the midst of these? Her dress was plain, certainly, and the colours she wore were so sombre as to allow her to slip through any ordinary crowd; but here, since she did not wear absolute rags, she might be observed in a moment. She remained in her obscurity, wondering what she must do.

It was very dark; a thick veil of vapour covered the stars, and the wind, which blew in gusts up the street, made the solitary lamp-light flicker and grow faint. In another minute Madge would have stepped forward, and relied for shelter on the darkness. Suddenly, before she could

move, it seemed that her silent prayer was answered. A shriek rent the air: a shower of curses followed, and almost simultaneously the groups in the street had gathered together in one place and were fighting and tearing at each other like wild beasts.

For a moment Madge, shocked and frightened, shrank back: then she stepped forward, and, passing unnoted a few paces down the street, entered the house she sought.

It was pitch dark inside: she could see nothing, but she put out her trembling hands to feel her way. The door opened into a passage, long and narrow, with boarded walls on either side, and a rough, uneven earthen floor. Several ragged figures, attracted doubtless by the cries without, rushed past her into the street; she heard a heavy tramp come down some

stairs: with a coarse oath she was pushed aside, and a man—but not the man she sought—ran out to join the fighting crowd.

Madge paused, and again wondered how she must proceed. The dangers of her position were growing upon her. In her eagerness to trace the man to his place of refuge, and then, when he could not escape, to face him fearlessly, she had quite overlooked the fact that he might be hiding among companions who would help him in any other dark deed he cared to do. True, she could quietly retrace her steps and bring the police to aid her; but that she would not do. It was to speak with the man, not to break her oath, that she had traced him hither.

Her fingers, still passing lightly along the boarded wall, suddenly grasped a door-handle: she turned it, a door opened,

and showed her the interior of a room. She glanced in: ere she could do more a terrible oath was uttered—something was flung violently at the door, which closed with a bang.

Madge passed on quickly, turned an angle in the passage and again faced a door. Again she lifted a latch, again she opened a door, but slowly this time, and with great caution. The bitter wind blew upon her from an open yard. After hesitating a moment, she stepped out, closing the door after her.

She stood in the yard and gazed around her by the aid of a light which streamed faintly through a patched and broken window. The window was uncurtained: several panes of glass were broken, and these were patched up with paper and rags. She crept forward a step or two,

selected from the dilapidated casement a clear pane, and looked through.

Her heart leapt quickly as she did so, and a glow like fire passed over her trembling frame. She saw a room, low in the ceiling, long and narrow; it was lit up with a guttering rush-light candle, and had for furniture a rickety table and one or two broken chairs which were overturned upon the floor. In one corner was a truss of straw with a few rags scattered above it. One or two sticks burnt faintly on the hearth, and near to this, huddling himself together as if for warmth, was the figure of a man.

She recognised him now in a moment.

Upon his wasted, careworn face the firelight played: it touched the tips of his fingers turning them, at least so it seemed to her sick vision, as red as blood. The

wind blew shrilly down the chimney, and scattered the burning ashes of the fire; it dashed through the broken panes in the window and dimmed the flickering light of the candle. The man sat as if listening: then he shuddered as he turned again towards the fire. Madge drew back, and, creeping into the darkest corner of the yard, stood for a moment in hesitation.

She must enter that room—but how? The door to it opened from the narrow passage which she had just traversed; but now the fighting crowd had been scattered, the people had flocked into the house, and the passage was full. As the footsteps approached, she shrank farther into the darkness, fearing lest her hiding-place might be discovered; but no one came near. The sound of heavy footsteps was heard for a time, gradually it became

fainter and fainter; then, with the sound of the voices, it died away.

Again, save for the dreary whistling of the wind, all was still. She looked again through the window. The man still sat on the hearth: the candle had guttered down almost to the socket, but enough light remained to illuminate vividly the forlorn face and figure. Summoning up all her strength, she retraced her steps into the passage: again she felt cautiously along the boarded walls; her fingers grasped a latch, she pressed it: the door opened. She crossed the threshold, closed the door, and stood, firmly facing the man.

With a quick cry he arose and fixed his eyes upon her. She returned the gaze, but even as she did so, she grasped at the door, for she felt that she was going to faint.

* * * * *

The storm is over: the fierce struggle is past. Madge still stands with her back to the door, but the man, sick at heart and trembling violently, has crept back to his seat beside the fast-dying fire. The room is almost in darkness, for the guttering rushlight burns low and dim; but outside the patched and broken window, faint rays of moonlight fall. All is still, save for the sound of the wind which clutches at the house, and shrieks as it passes on.

Madge is looking steadily at the man. How her heart is beating! She can hear it throbbing against her side, and her hands are as cold as clay. Twenty minutes before, when she thought she stood in peril, when the man, whom she knew had committed murder, stretched forth his hands in a frenzy of rage and

fear as if forcibly to silence her, she had stood calm and unmoved, and boldly told him she was not afraid.

'If you are coward enough to harm me,' she said, 'you can do so—I am quite alone!'

The calmness of her courage amazed him: he shrank back. Then, when the whole truth dawned upon him, when he realised the fact that this young girl had, despite the weight of her trouble, religiously preserved his secret, and then, when her last hope had fled, had come to that den alone, to ask for help and justice, he hung his head guiltily, and, shivering, turned away.

At sight of his distress, Madge's heart softened; for the first time that night, tears came into her eyes, and, going forward, she stood at his very side. She opened her lips to speak, but no words

came. Then the man, looking with sad weary eyes into her face, seemed to read her heart.

'Look you here, my girl,' he said, 'I know well enough what you want—you want to be the death of me, that's the long and short of it: you want me to give myself up to be hung like a dog; but I'll see you all damned before I'll do it, and so I tell you!'

He rose, and turned away from her; he walked up to the fire and kicked at the smouldering ashes on the hearth.

'Come, you'd best make off,' he continued, still with his face turned from her. 'This ain't the sort of place for the likes of you to hang about in: at this time of night you ought to be at home.'

Still Madge was silent. She stood upon the hearth with her eyes fixed upon the

fire and the tears trembling upon her lashes as if about to fall. As the man ceased speaking, they coursed gently down her cheeks: she pressed her teeth upon her under lip to stifle the sobs which were rising. With an effort she conquered her emotion, and, rising, faced her companion. His eyes were still turned away, but by the flickering firelight Madge could see his face. It was like the face of a dead man. She held forth her trembling hands.

'You are going to do as I ask you?' she cried wistfully. 'You will help me to save my cousin Conn?'

He did not answer her: he held his head aside, and shrank still farther away.

'When you were friendless and starving,' continued Madge, 'my uncle was the first to give you shelter and food: my cousin was ready to lend you a helping hand;

they would not have harmed a hair of your head: but look what you have done to them! You brought a curse to our house the first night you came there, I think, for we have scarcely known a happy moment since we took you in—you know all this, but you have not one grain of pity. What does it matter to you, that my uncle's heart is broken, that my cousin is likely to be convicted for a murder which he never did? You think you are safe, because I have sworn to be silent. I did swear: but remember there are times when it is justifiable that such oaths should be broken!'

The man started, and, turning, looked into her face.

'What do you mean?' he cried hoarsely; 'you wouldn't speak — you *daren't!*'

'Up till to-night, I thought I could not,' continued Madge; 'but now I have changed my mind. I cannot let my cousin die. Thank God I am not afraid to suffer, and, sooner than let this trouble go on, I would even break my oath! Do you think I can be dumb to-morrow, when they question me in the court? Do you think I could come out and leave my cousin there, perhaps to be sentenced to die? No, no! I couldn't do it—I couldn't do it! Don't think I don't pity you,' she continued; 'I do—God knows I do—and if by sacrificing myself I could save you both, you should both be free—but I will not let an innocent life be sworn away!'

As Madge ceased speaking, the man raised his agonised face to hers.

'Look at me—look at me!' he said; 'I

don't look as if I was long for this world, do I ?'

'No !'

'What's more, I don't care how soon I leave it. It's been a hard world to me, and the luck's been against me ever since I was born. But I can't face hanging—I haven't the heart, though once I was bold as the devil himself. Besides, it was all a chance—all my cursed luck again. I never meant to shoot Lord Rigby, so help me God ! and I ain't going to hang for what I never meant to do !'

His voice had sunk now into a curious mingling of a growl and a whimper, and his eyes glanced furtively at Madge as if seeking some sort of human sympathy.

'I am sorry for you,' she said almost involuntarily, in answer to his appeal ; 'God help you !'

'God help me? He never did, and He never will; besides, there's no God for the poor, though there may be for the rich. Oh yes, I know what you're going to say—some rot about praying and putting trust in the Lord. Much of that! But what's the use of talking? If you're going to give me up, give me up! I don't much care after all!'

He ceased, and sat scowling with his eyes fixed on hers. She put her hand on his shoulder: he shivered under the touch.

'I do not wish to give you up. I pity you, and I am sure that what you say is true.'

'Well?'

'Will you release me from my promise? May I tell what I know?'

'What you've sworn, you've sworn!' he

answered sullenly; 'I can't free you—mind that!'

'I cannot see my cousin die for what you have done.'

'Time enough to talk about that. He isn't sentenced yet.'

He leant over to the hearth and extended his hands towards the few sparks of fire which still flickered in the grate. Presently he looked over his shoulder at Madge. She stood where he had left her—her eyes were fixed upon him.

'Well?' he said fiercely, 'why don't you go?'

She did not answer him at first: she bent over him and took his wasted hand in both of hers.

'God will help you if you try to do what is right,' she said quietly.

The man drew his hand peevishly away.

'You'd better go,' he said. 'Come, I want to be alone—I ain't safe to touch, and I wonder you ain't afraid. There, be off! If you want me, you'll find me easy enough to-morrow.'

The flickering candle had gone out by this time, and, save for the straggling moonrays which crept through the window, the room was in total darkness. Madge could not see the man's face, only the dark outline of his form as he sat huddled up at her side. The sound of his voice grated on her ear and made her soul sick.

There was now no necessity for her to linger, yet she felt she could not go. It was not because she dreaded to leave the man, fearing lest during that night he might creep away and hide to save his life. It was the sight of his sorrow-

stricken face and form which kept her now, and made her tremble with mingled fear and sorrow.

At last he looked up again.

'We've had enough of this. I haven't the heart to harm you, though perhaps you mean to be my death. Go home to your friends. There's no mischief done to your flesh and blood as yet, and he's got a good chance of his life. But you go home; this ain't the place for a girl like you!'

Madge silently wiped the tears from her eyes, and said wearily:

'Very well, I will go away.'

Still she lingered, as if some hand detained her; but the man did not speak again, neither did he attempt to move, so Madge was obliged to turn and go. A deep sob shook her frame as she crossed the

threshold. He listened, but he did not look round.

Whither she went when she left that house she did not know, but some divine power seemed to guide her weary footsteps right.

When at length the trance passed away, she found herself standing in the sitting-room of the inn, with George Aldyn and Mr. Dunraven gazing at her in wonder and holding her trembling hands. George was questioning her eagerly; but she said nothing, until suddenly she encountered her uncle's wistful gaze; then she threw her arms around the old man's neck and burst into passionate tears.

'Oh, Uncle Patrick,' she sobbed, 'my heart is broken!'

CHAPTER IX.

MADGE BEARS WITNESS.

GEORGE ALDYN did not leave the inn that night. As soon as he had induced Madge and Mr. Dunraven to go to their rooms, he threw a fresh supply of coal on the fire and sat down to await the dawn.

It had been a cold, cheerless night, and as day broke, the aspect of the little town was very dreary indeed. The wind blew a perfect hurricane, and the blackened

clouds in the sky sent forth blinding showers of hail. At seven o'clock a maid came in to clean the room, and George, being aroused from his trance, suddenly remembered that his absence that night, if unexplained, might cause some speculation to arise in the minds of his friends.

So he at once despatched a note to the Rectory, giving Mr. Dunraven as the cause of his delay in town, and saying that, during the time of Conn's trial, he deemed it absolutely necessary that he should remain by his uncle's side. This done, he was shown to a dressing-room to prepare himself for the day. Half an hour later he returned to the sitting-room, seeming very little the worse for his night's vigil.

He found the room looking bright and clean. A snowy cloth covered the table,

breakfast was laid and a boiling brass kettle stood near the brightly burning fire. A cat which had crept up from the kitchen was drying her wet fur, and purring softly upon the hearth. Near to the window stood Madge.

She too was dressed for the day, in thick dark winter clothes. Her face was turned to the window, and her eyes looked wearily out upon the cold wet busy street. When George entered she did not move, and he paused, just within the doorway, to look at her. Her profile was visible above the thick dark furs which were wound about her throat. Her cheek wore a pallor which was almost death-like, and her features were clearly limned as those of a marble statue; her lips, however, had not lost their colour, and her eyes, looking from the long dark curved lashes, seemed

to be gazing sadly into a world which was not their own.

During the summer time George Aldyn had felt, while conversing with Madge, that he was chatting to a child — grave beyond her years, and with very foolish notions of men and things—he now felt that the child had developed into a woman possessed of a soul which he could but dimly understand.

'She is as far removed from me,' he thought, 'as the moon is from this low earth. Even her faults are moonlike and spiritual. If I had only met her when I first met Rosamond, she might have influenced me for some good—but she came too late. Well, I alone am the sufferer. She has shown me what I might have become—she has made me feel what it is to love.'

He walked forward and Madge turned her head. As she recognised him she started; a faint colour mounted to her cheeks, and she held forth a trembling hand.

Neither spoke: both seemed harassed with the same sorrowful thoughts; but even amidst the twilight of her trouble, Madge felt that it was some comfort to feel the protecting presence of the young Englishman near, and to know that whatever happened he would still remain her friend. So she stood with her eyes fixed upon the window, and allowed her hand to remain warmly clasped in his; and though the wind still blew bitterly, the sky was every moment growing blacker and the rain and hail fell in more blinding showers, the prospect without did not seem to her so dreary as it had done ten minutes

before—when she had stood there alone with the shadow of the court before her and the memory of last night still vivid in her mind.

Presently Mr. Dunraven came in, and Madge, leaving her place by the window, began to move nervously about the room. She feared he might question her as to her proceedings on the previous night—but he seemed to have forgotten that she had been away at all. He kissed her quietly when he came in, and patted her cheek; then he took the chair which had been placed for him at the table, and glanced at the clock on the chimney-piece as if he, too, were wearying to be gone. But before leaving the inn George Aldyn did his best to make them eat.

'Fasting and want of rest,' he said, 'are the two sure passports to illness. Without

food this morning neither of you will be fit to face a crowded court. Come, Madge, set your uncle a good example: try to take some breakfast before you go!'

So Madge, always obedient to him, took her seat at the table and forced herself to eat a little bread, and drink some tea. Her uncle, with heavy sighs, followed her example.

When the meal was over, the cab which was to take them to the court drove up to the door of the inn, and the three left the breakfast-table and went out together.

The streets were pretty full by this time; and before the door of the court quite a large crowd had congregated. Everybody looked pinched with the cold, and drenched with the hail and rain. Some could hardly keep their place against the fierce force of the wind, which was rushing against the

doors of the court, thundering on the roof, sweeping along streets and alleys, and beating down the fierce white rain.

The sitting had already begun when Madge arrived, but her name had not been called. Two witnesses were to give their evidence before her; so while awaiting her summons she paced the corridors, leaning on George Aldyn's arm. Once or twice he paused to force some wine upon her, for he saw that she was suffering intensely. Her lips were quite white now —her heart was throbbing painfully. He spoke hopefully and tried to give her comfort, but she seemed deaf to all he said.

Presently her name was called, and, as if she feared to linger, she hurried up to the door and entered. Once inside, her senses became clouded as in a mist: she could see nothing; a faint perfume greeted her

nostrils—a clammy warmth stole over her —and she heard in her ears a buzz of human voices. Then the mist cleared away—she saw that she was making her way through the crowd towards the witness-box, with George Aldyn walking beside her, holding her trembling arm. She was shivering now, but when she entered the witness-box her cheeks burned like fire, and her hands were clasped upon her heart as if to still its beating.

The court was more densely packed than ever. The prospect of hearing a death-sentence passed had been the means of drawing forth, even in such inclement weather, a larger number than ever of those curious people who delight to witness tragedies of any kind. They now filled the gallery, making it look almost as gay as the boxes of a theatre: for stylish

bonnets or caps covered the heads of the ladies, and on their laps lay opera-glasses and smelling-salts; the one to enable them to stare contentedly at anybody in court, the other to revive their fainting faculties should the tragedy deepen into an intensity which it was beyond their strength to bear.

Madge, standing in the witness-box with her right hand upheld to take the oath, felt conscious of the pulsating mass of humanity around her, but she did not raise her eyes to see who might be there. She knew that George Aldyn, after putting her into the witness-box, had taken his stand close by; she had caught a glimpse of her uncle's pale careworn face, and then she had looked at Conn.

But Conn did not look at her. Indeed he seemed now almost indifferent to what was going on. He looked ten years older

than he had done on the preceding day. Those in court believed that the shadow of his approaching doom had already filled him with despair, for his face looked grey and worn, and he hung his head like a man whose last hope had fled.

It was the opinion of every one who sat in court that day that ere the hour of sunset sentence of death would be passed upon the prisoner. Even George Aldyn, who would fain have forced himself to believe differently, was gradually becoming troubled with the popular belief. Every witness, whether called by the prosecution or defence, had been forced to say something which helped to criminate Conn. And now here was Madge, after whose evidence the end would soon come; what could *she* say?

Mr. Dunraven, creeping close to the witness-box, turned his face, so full of con-

centrated sorrow, upon her, as if his own life hung upon her words. Madge saw him. For one brief moment their eyes met, then grasping nervously at the crucifix which hung at her side, she turned to answer the questions of the counsel.

There was a death-like stillness in the court. Madge felt all about her a sense of oppressed breathing and staring eyes, and the feeling made her tremble and feel dizzy. If some one would only talk, she thought—why did they keep so still? If she could only feel a hand grasping hers! But she was all alone—alone with so much life about her—so many curious eyes.

Presently this changed. The counsel was questioning; she was replying—but she hardly knew what she said; apparently she gave correct answers to the few trivial pre-

liminary questions, for she was not reproved.

'You say it was about five o'clock when your cousin, armed with his gun, left you at the cottage gate. Well, after he was gone, what did you do?'

'I stood for a long time looking after him down the road.'

'Well, and then?'

'Then, I went into the house and lit the lamp and sat down to read.'

'Yes. What happened next? Did the prisoner return?'

'My cousin? No, no; *he* did not come,' cried Madge, in such a strange tone that a murmur of surprise and sympathy ran through the court.

She was as white as death—suddenly a spot like a crimson blood-stain burnt on one of her cheeks, leaving the other ghastly. Her

left hand grasped the cross, her right was tremblingly pressed on the side of the witness-box.

'You emphasise the pronoun,' continued the counsel, blandly; 'will you kindly tell me if *any one* came to you while you were sitting at home that night?'

For a minute Madge did not reply; then she said slowly:

'Yes; some men came to the door. They were searching for some one, and they told me to lock my doors, for there were bad people about.'

The counsel for the defence looked disappointed. They had hoped that they would be able to turn Madge's evidence to account; but it was so trivial she need hardly have been called. Mr. Dunraven had already sunk in despair on to a bench,

George Aldyn was wondering how to get him and Madge safely away before sentence should be delivered, and Conn was nerving himself up for the worst. Madge was requested to leave the box: she did not move. She stood like one in a trance, staring at the crucifix which she now held before her eyes, and then at Conn.

'You may leave the box, Miss Dunraven,' said the counsel again.

George Aldyn, taking her hand in his, whispered:

'Come, Madge; come!'

The pressure of his hand did what the barrister's voice had failed to do. Madge shook off the trance which seemed to have paralysed her, drew her hand from George Aldyn's grasp, and took firm hold of the witness-box.

'I cannot go down,' she said; 'I cannot let this go on. God knows I have tried to do right—and perhaps after all I have done wrong. I have nearly broken my uncle's heart—I have made my cousin suffer—but, God help me, I cannot let him die!'

A murmur ran through the court. Before a word could be said, she spoke again.

'You must not harm my cousin,' she cried excitedly, casting an agonised look around her; then stretching her hands wildly towards the judge, she exclaimed:

'Oh, my lord, he never did this murder! *I* know that—I have known it all along—but you see I did not tell, because I was afraid.'

All in court thought the girl had gone

suddenly mad. Her eyes were wild and wandering, her manner frenzied. The counsel for the prosecution, who had risen to make a protest, requested her immediate removal. George Aldyn had stepped forward to lead her away, when the counsel for the defence rose.

'Stay, Miss Dunraven. You say the prisoner did not commit the murder. Have you any information which will enable you to inform the court who did ?'

'Yes, I *know !*'

Conn raised his head, a wild look, half of hope, half of fear, passing over his face. Mr. Dunraven crept forward, and George Aldyn dropped her hand. Every eye in the court was fixed upon her.

Then Madge remembered the oath which she had almost broken. She stared at the faces surrounding her, at the ques-

tioning counsel, the frowning judge, at Conn, looking at her now with such concentrated agony in his eyes, but she said nothing, and for the third time the counsel repeated his question.

'Miss Dunraven,' he said, 'will you be good enough to name the person whom you know to be guilty of this murder?'

Again there was a death-like stillness throughout the court. Madge, standing so quietly in the box, was enduring the agony of a lifetime. At last she spoke; but she did so in a voice so low that it was scarcely heard.

'Do not ask me that!' she said; 'for I have sworn to be silent, and I must keep my word!'

The counsel for the prosecution looked at each other and smiled; the judge

frowned with even more severity than before. Again came the command for the witness to step down. But Madge kept her place. She was a good deal calmer now; she looked from counsel to judge with pitiful pleading eyes.

'I am speaking now on my oath!' she said, 'and it is because I would not break an oath that you are trying my cousin. I tell you he is as innocent of Lord Rigby's death as I am. Will you not believe what I say?'

The counsel for the prosecution rose again.

'My lord,' he said, 'this witness is evidently bent on prejudicing the jury and delaying the case.'

But Madge interrupted him.

'No, no; I do not wish to do that. I am but telling you the truth, that you may

not condemn an innocent man whom you have worked so hard to prove guilty. Oh, uncle!' she cried, as they tried to draw her from the box, 'keep them away—don't let them take me from here; for once I get down there amongst the crowd again they will not listen to me, and I shall not be able to save Conn!'

Her excitement had grown over-mastering; she seemed hardly to have control over her actions, or to know what she said or did. Seeing this, George Aldyn came forward and took possession of her hands. His touch seemed to calm her; she looked down into his face, and her eyes filled with tears. Then in pitiful entreaty she looked round the court.

'Is there no one will help me?' she cried in anguish. 'Is there no one will speak a word to save an in-

nocent man? Must I break my oath and die?'

She spoke wildly, with fixed gaze and quivering lip, and for the moment she seemed to forget that she was standing in a crowded court. Her words fell ominously on every ear: it seemed to all that she was raving. The scented ladies in the gallery drew their cloaks about them with a shudder, then sat in shocked silence, looking with coldly reproving eyes into the girl's white face. The judge frowned more angrily than ever, and rose from his seat, as if to silence her. The jury, after quietly watching the girl, turned to look into each other's faces in greater wonder than before. The silence in the court was almost death-like. Every one was waiting, watching, and listening.

There was a pause.

Madge turned her face to the judge, and seemed about to make a last appeal. Suddenly her eyes became fixed, she uttered a low cry, and shrank in terror.

CHAPTER X.

MATTHEW DALTON.

FACING her, with his wild eyes fixed on hers, was a man whose strangely forbidding yet piteous face she recognised at a glance. He had risen up, at first unnoticed, in the body of the court; then, as his wretched rags and wobegone countenance began to attract attention, he was being hustled, whispered to, and pointed to the door. But he stood his ground resolutely, and took

no heed, still gazing steadfastly at Madge.

At last, as she seemed swooning before his gaze, he turned his face to the judge, and, stretching out his right hand, cried loudly:

'I'm the man. I killed Lord Rigby!'

A murmur, deepening to a roar, ran through the court. Everybody struggled to see the speaker.

'Stand back!' cried the judge. 'Are you mad? what do you want?'

'I'm not mad,' said the man, doggedly, 'and I want justice. What that poor girl says is true. Set that young chap free, and put me in his place!'

The words rang from end to end of the crowded court. For a moment there was an intense stillness: the pulsating mass of humanity in the court seemed to become

like stone. Then with another thunderous roar the pent-up excitement again burst forth. Madge was forgotten, the prisoner was overlooked; the judge's frowns were of no avail, nor were the silencing cries of the usher. The people in the court rose *en masse*, those occupying the body of the chamber also rose tumultuously; every eye and ear was strained to hear and see.

Amidst all this tumult the man stood erect. He had removed his hat on entering the court; his grey head was visible now to every eye. He had drawn his coat-sleeve across his forehead to wipe away the straggling masses of rain-drenched hair. He turned his ghastly face towards the bench.

At that moment Conn and Mr. Dunraven recognised the outcast whose life

they had saved ; while the judge recognised a vagabond whom, three years before, he had sentenced for poaching on Lord Rigby's land and maltreating Lord Rigby's keeper.

Still no one spoke—the tumult in the court was yet loud and deep, despite the silencing cries of the usher. When at length tolerable calmness and quiet was restored, the judge, looking down at the man, addressed him.

'Do you mean to say, man, that you come here to-day to deliver yourself up to justice ? Are you prepared to swear that you, and you alone, are guilty of the murder of the nobleman whose untimely death has been laid to the charge of the prisoner at the bar ?'

At first the man did not reply ; the question, in a less verbose form, was

repeated to him. Then he said stolidly:

'Yes, I'm the man! I killed him: that lad there had no more to do with it than you had! Don't think I come here to-day,' he added, glancing round at the lawyers and barristers who filled the well, 'to do a good turn to any one of *you*—I don't! If you, and a lot more like you, were to be cleaned off the face of the earth to-morrow, I should be glad. What do you care—what do the likes of you ever care—for poor wretches like me? Did you ever do a poor man a good turn? Never! And you done your best to hunt me down like a dog. I know you again just as well as I see you know me;—and I know your lordship too, worse luck! Better than three years ago now we came together in this very court, and because I was a

poor devil who had no relations and no home, and who had a cold-blooded lord and parson against me, and who had only struck out at a blackguard of a keeper that tried to strangle me, you sent me to the treadmill for three years, and only gave me that because the law wouldn't let you give me more! Well, I worked them three years, and when that was over I was turned out—a poor, hunted, half-starved chap that was only fit to die in a ditch. But I didn't die. I went back to Armstead, thinking my old pals would give me a helping hand. Well, p'r'aps they might have done, if they'd been alone; but that d——d scamp of a keeper was there again—he set them on to hunt me—and, if I hadn't got help one night, God only knows what they wouldn't have done. I couldn't help myself then, but I swore

I'd have my revenge even if it brought me to the gallows. And I've had it, by ——! and here I am!'

He paused, and stared wildly into the body of the court. His eyes were fixed upon the pale face of Scott, the late Lord Rigby's keeper. His square jaw was set, his hand clenched. Despite his wo-begone face and the sharp cough which seized him from time to time, he looked ready to spring and strike a death-blow. The commotion in court was increasing, the excitement grew more and more intense. Women were fainting hysterically, men were shouting aloud. At last the judge, in a voice trembling with passion, ordered the man to be taken into custody at once.

* * * * *

How had Matthew Dalton come there?

When Madge had alighted at the doors of the court that morning, a man, whom every one who noticed him at all took for a beggar, had crept as if for shelter into a corner, and himself unseen had watched her. When she had paced the corridor, leaning on George Aldyn's arm, he was keenly observing her face; at last, when she entered the court, he pushed his way in too.

For a time he remained near the door—his eyes still fixed upon Madge's face—but as the evidence proceeded he crept nearer and nearer to the witness-box. He found little difficulty in making his way—although the court was so crowded—for at sight of him the people instinctively gathered their dresses more closely around them and shrank back, as if to avoid coming into collision with so sorry a figure. Besides, his clothes

were soaking wet; so was his white hair, which, wild and unkempt, fell in tangled masses over his furrowed brow.

However, people were too deeply interested in the proceedings to notice him much; had they done so they would have seen that his face—so haggard, pinched, and deathly-white — was now and then distorted with a wild spasm of terror, which altered again into a look so pitifully sad yet determined, it would have melted the hardest heart to tears.

While the spectators fixed their gaze upon Madge Dunraven, he crept on until he stood—sheltered now by a protecting form—within full view of her face.

There he paused. He did not look at Madge, but he cast his eyes down, and stood listening. He did not feel the touch of the garments, which, soaked through

and through, clung clammily to his form. He was listening to the evidence, and as he listened, as question and answer rang in his eager ears, it seemed that there was stamped upon his face the impress of years of pain. It was winter-time, and the clothes he wore were only fitted for summer weather; yet as he stood there the perspiration streamed down his face and fell dripping from his hair. Once or twice he glanced down at the barristers who were working so assiduously at the case; the jury, sitting so stolidly in their places; the judge, wrapped in his robes of justice and having for a background the square of scarlet cloth, on which were the words, 'Dieu et mon droit.' He turned his head away, but even then the golden letters glittered before him, and the scarlet hue of the cloth seemed to blind his aching

eyes. At last his quick ear caught the words:

'Is there no one will help me? Is there no one will speak a word to save an innocent man? Must I break my oath and die?'

As they fell from Madge's trembling lips he shrank back in a wild paroxysm of fear.

But only for a moment, then he rose and stood with head upraised facing her, gazing into her eyes.

* * * * *

With a policeman on each side of him, and handcuffs now upon his wrists, Matthew Dalton turned again and fixed his gaze upon the judge.

'Of course you'll hang me!' he said; 'well, much good may it do you. I don't care—but don't think I'd give my life for

you, or what you call the Law. No, when I was hunted and kicked, and made no more account of than a starving dog—when I was almost at death's door, I say, and neither law nor judge, nor even God Almighty, would help me—I found one little friend that stood by me, and gave me a kind word. It was like my luck that I should bring *her* trouble—just like my cursed luck;—but, by God, I'm a man still, though you all tried to make a beast and a devil of me, and I don't mean to stand by and see her or her kith and kin come to harm. My girl,' he continued, turning to Madge, who now stood half-fainting close up to George Aldyn's side, 'you're the right sort. I'm here to-day just because *you're* in trouble. I'm speaking the truth now to help *you!*'

Again the judge rose.

'Remove that man!' he cried.

And before Matthew Dalton was taken away, he added:

'Gentlemen, this trial must be postponed until such time as a proper investigation into these extraordinary revelations can be made. Remove both prisoners. Although this man has taken upon himself the guilt of this terrible crime, I do not yet deem it necessary to alter the position of the prisoner at the bar.'

As he ceased speaking the tumult in the court arose again. Half-struggling, half-yielding, Matthew Dalton was led, handcuffed and guarded, out of court. A moment afterwards, Conn, handcuffed and guarded, too, followed him. Justice had closed her fangs upon two victims now, instead of one.

CHAPTER XI.

AFTER THE STORM.

AT last Madge is alone, and though the night air is bitterly cold she stands at the open window unprotected from its icy touch. She listens to the chiming of the clocks, and when they cease she feels the dreary echoes continue to toll in her brain. Around her all is very quiet, save now and then when a footstep comes slowly up the street, and passes. Her aching head is pressed

against the window-pane: she is trying to think. Her mind, already so sorely overtaxed, refuses to work; it is only in fitful pictures—some blurred, others vivid—that the events of that day pass before her mental sight.

The last scene in the court she remembers with a vividness which is almost terrifying. Wherever her eyes may wander, upon whatever object they may rest, she sees again the face of one man as it arose before her that day, wild and haggard, pinched and thin, with the large sad eyes gazing into hers in pitiful protest.

She had not fainted;—during the enacting of the whole scene she had stood as calm as any there; but the moment the man, handcuffed and guarded, was led out of court, she had turned quietly to George Aldyn and asked him to take her home.

She dreaded lest at any moment the eyes of the crowd should be fixed curiously upon her; besides, what with the excitement and the stifling atmosphere, she was beginning to feel sick and ill.

But when once she was out of the stifling court, she felt in a measure relieved. She refused to be put into a cab, so George Aldyn—offering now no opposition to her will—drew her hand through his arm, and the two walked along the desolate streets together.

The violence of the storm had somewhat abated: the rain still fell in fitful showers but its touch refreshed her: the wind still blew dismally, and she raised her face to meet its breath. The streets were almost as desolate as they were dreary—for an immense crowd had gathered about the doors of the court—and ere Madge had

walked many yards she saw that the few who yet lingered at the street corners seemed suddenly possessed with a yearning desire to swell the crowd assembled in the square. Faint rumours of the extraordinary scene, which was even then being concluded in court, had got abroad, and popular excitement was aroused.

The two walked on in silence; in silence, too, they entered the inn, and passed straight upstairs to the sitting-room.

Here all was cosy brightness and warmth; a fire burnt in the grate, the cat still lay upon the hearth, and the red curtains were half drawn across the windows to shut out the chill prospect in the street.

Madge crossed the room, and sank wearily into a chair which stood near the fire.

She must have lost consciousness then; for the next scene she remembers is opening her eyes to find her uncle and George Aldyn bending anxiously above her. When she opened her eyes George Aldyn stood aside, but Mr. Dunraven wound his arms around her, and laid her aching head upon his breast. He had no reproaches for her, nothing but love and trustfulness still. She had expected reproaches, cold looks, and perhaps a few hard words; yes, and had he given them she would have deemed it justice, after the measure of sorrow which she had meted out to him. His kindness overcame her, and drew forth the tears.

'Don't cry, Madge; don't cry!' said Mr. Dunraven soothingly, while the girl sobbed hysterically on his shoulder. 'Try to say a prayer, mavourneen, for the poor miser-

able man who came to the court to-day—God help him—to save our boy!'

And now, when all the town is quiet, when George Aldyn has gone to his friends, and Mr. Dunraven, a very weary man, sleeps the first peaceful sleep which he has slept for months, these words come back to Madge, and with them comes the echo of those others which had been spoken in court that day.

'I'm a man still, though you did try to make a beast of me, and while I live *she* shan't come to any harm.'

How quiet the town is now! the last straggler has gone away to his home; every door is closed and fastened; every sound is hushed. The sky is black above, and the air is thick with a mist of falling rain. Madge feels she cannot sleep: her spirit will not rest, her eyes will not close,

so she stands by the window and lets the cold breeze blow upon her cheek. Thus the night passes for her, but when the first faint light of morning comes streaming into the room, it finds her lying on the outside of the bed in a deep feverish sleep.

* * * * *

Just one week from that day, Madge found herself again in the quiet cottage at Armstead.

As soon as her work was over and there was no absolute necessity for her to remain in the busy little town, she had been glad to return to the peace and quietness of her home. She had expected, and indeed half hoped, that George Aldyn—whom she knew was in Gresham at the time—would have offered to be her escort; but he did not, and she returned with her uncle alone. But Mr. Dunraven did not remain in

Armstead. Every day he went up to Gresham to see how things were going with Conn.

Although Conn was still detained in gaol, it was confidently asserted everywhere that he would soon be set free. During his trial, the case against him had been made to look very black indeed; but nobody seemed now to retain the slightest idea that he had any concern in Lord Rigby's death. Matthew Dalton had told his story, and formally made the confession which he knew would be his death; Madge, now that her lips were unsealed, had told hers; still, it was said the law was very exacting, and many formalities must be gone through before the innocent prisoner could be set free.

At last, after a good deal of the law's unnecessary delay, things seemed to shape

themselves satisfactorily, and Conn was liberated. Matthew Dalton still lay in Gresham gaol, awaiting his trial and the sentence which would surely be passed upon him for the murder of Lord Rigby.

CHAPTER XII.

GEORGE RECEIVES HIS CONGÉ.

HALF an hour after Conn walked out of Gresham gaol a free man, the news of his liberation was being familiarly discussed far and wide. In the new light of events he was regarded as a hero, and almost everybody had a good word to say of him. Now that he was proved by the laws of the country to be guiltless of the crime for which he had been tried, it was wonderful how many

sympathising friends could come forward and declare that he had always been a frank, open-hearted, jovial young fellow, who was utterly incapable of crime of any kind.

But Conn did not wish to be lionised; all he wanted was to get home quietly, and for a time at least to be left entirely alone. He could not shake off all at once the degrading taint of prison life; he could not forget that, for two days, he had stood in a crowded court, handcuffed and guarded like a common felon—that every finger had been pointed at him as a thing unfit to look in the face of any honest man.

Mr. Dunraven and Madge went to Gresham to meet him: they had driven up in the rector's carriage, and it now stood at the door of the governor's house, waiting to take them home. Mr. Aldyn,

hearing that Mr. Dunraven intended going to Gresham, had placed the vehicle entirely at his disposal. He had added that both he and Mrs. Aldyn would be pleased if the Dunravens, on reaching Armstead, would drive straight to the rectory, and remain there for dinner; but this offer Mr. Dunraven had refused. He knew that when his son returned to Armstead he would wish to go quietly to his own home.

So about two hours after sunset, the carriage which held Conn rolled quietly through Armstead, and pulled up at the little white wicket-gate close to the cottage. Its progress through the village had not been noted, for the night was dark and cloudy, but when it stopped at the cottage-gate and Conn alighted, he was surprised at a hand being extended to grasp his own, and a voice saying quietly:

'Welcome, my boy! I am glad to be able to see you return safely to your home!'

It was Mr. Aldyn who spoke. He had come to the cottage two hours before, so anxious was he to be the first to congratulate his nephew on his liberation. He deemed this a fitting opportunity to lay aside any resentment he might feel against his Irish kinsfolk. He was genuinely sorry to think that they should have been made to suffer so much unnecessary pain, and he was anxious to do what little lay in his power to make amends. But he said little to them that night; perhaps he felt that his presence there was irksome; so after he had shaken hands all round, and imprinted a cold kiss on Madge's brow, he entered his carriage and ordered his coachman to drive him home.

But Mr. Aldyn had not confined his

welcome to a few cold formal words. When our travellers entered the cottage they found that a comfortable meal awaited them: that the rector had sent down some of his choicest wines; that Mrs. Aldyn had gathered some of her most delicate greenhouse flowers, and these were prettily placed in small bouquets beside each plate at the table.

It was a strange home-coming—there was so much sorrow mingled with so much joy.

But the delight which Mr. Dunraven felt at seeing his son a free man was considerably diminished every time he raised his eyes to look in Conn's face. He was certainly very much changed; so much indeed that his father, noting his peculiar looks and ways, thought over and over again, 'He will never be right so long as

he stays here: we must get him away from Armstead.'

But that was not so easy. Conn still felt a wild fascination for the village, perhaps because it was the home of Rosamond Leigh.

Rosamond was the last to hear the news of his return home. Since that day when she had stood in the witness-box and perjured herself so deliberately, she had become quite a recluse, living entirely in her own rooms, and refusing to see any soul save Lord Rigby himself. She was in a dilemma, and knew not what to do.

If Conn were to be sentenced to imprisonment, her way would be clear enough. She could then carry out her compact with George Aldyn, persuade Lord Rigby, whom she had already enlisted on her side, to help him to a com-

fortable living, and spend the rest of her life in indolent ease as a rich rector's wife. But if it should happen that Conn escaped scot-free, what then? Could she still marry George Aldyn?—no, she felt she dared not; for from the first moment of wearing her marriage ring, she would be in mortal dread of Conn Dunraven. He would be nearly related to her, often perhaps be brought into close communion with her, and George would soon discover the terrible hold which he had over her life.

When she remembered the look which had passed over his face as she gave her evidence, she trembled.

'Oh no,' she said to herself, 'it would never do. If he should get free, I must refuse to marry George Aldyn, and leave Armstead before there is any chance of my meeting Conn.'

Thus she sat and pondered, waiting for the news which at length came.

It was brought to her by her maid, who came to dress her mistress for dinner. The girl had discussed it liberally in the kitchen, and now came prepared to discuss it all over again while brushing out the soft tresses of her mistress's hair. But Rosamond was in no mood to listen to the garrulous chatter of her servant. Having picked out one or two important truths from the long and highly embellished story which was poured into her ear, she peremptorily ordered the girl to leave her, saying that she would dine in her own room and not be at the trouble of dressing. Much mortified, the girl retired and rushed downstairs to tell her fellow-servants of the peculiar manner in which her mistress had taken the news.

Left to herself, Rosamond sat down to think it all over. Conn was free—nay more—in Armstead! Her way was clear: she must invent some tangible excuse for breaking with George Aldyn; then she must quit Armstead before there could be any chance of her meeting with his rival.

She was sorry now that she had not allowed her maid to dress her, in order that she could dine below with Lord Rigby. He was a sensible man; from the moment of their meeting he had taken an unusual interest in her and her affairs. Half an hour's conversation with him might, she thought, be useful in guiding her as to what was best to be done.

She was delighted therefore when her maid appeared, ushering in a footman who bore her mistress's dinner on a silver tray, and who brought a message from his

lordship hoping it was nothing serious which kept her to her room, and begging to have her company that day in the drawing-room when coffee was served.

'Yes, yes; say I will come with pleasure,' said Rosamond quickly; and the footman bowed and retired.

Half an hour later Rosamond stood before the great looking-glass surveying herself from head to foot. She smiled, and all her coldness melted away; for the moment, all her fears were forgotten in the contemplation of her own personal charms.

'How wonderfully well mourning becomes me,' she said; 'do you know, Osborne, I think I shall always wear black.'

'Until you put it off for your wedding,

miss,' returned the girl, and Rosamond shivered again.

Presently Rosamond sat in the drawing-room listening with a plaintive smile to the somewhat vapid conversation of Lord Rigby. She sat in a low crimson velvet chair, her head well thrown back, her right hand negligently holding a fire-screen upon which her eyes rested. He was standing a few yards off in the shadow, quietly watching her. He was thinking how pretty she looked, what a delicate skin she had, and what a profusion of lovely golden hair; but he was saying:

'My dear Miss Leigh, since you have honoured me with your confidence, I have thought it worth while to give you my advice. But pray do not consider yourself bound in any way to take it. I certainly think that under the circumstances

it would be a most injudicious thing for you to marry this Mr. Aldyn.'

'You are quite right, my lord,' returned Rosamond, softly. 'I will take your advice. Of course, while my guardian lived, I felt that it was my duty to obey him, even to the extent of marrying his choice; but now everything is so changed, and I do not consider myself bound. I will write to Mr. Aldyn, and, if he consents to give me my liberty, I will accept your sister's invitation, and will leave Armstead with as little delay as possible.'

Lord Rigby bowed; and Rosamond, glancing sadly around the room, continued:

'It will be painful for me to leave the home where I have spent so many happy years of my life, but of course my reason tells me it is the best course I can adopt.

Nothing but change of scene will erase from my mind the memory of all this sorrow.'

Still Lord Rigby said nothing, but he thought:

'I am glad she will abide by my advice. She is far too lovely to degrade herself by marrying a man who has a fair prospect of becoming a curate, and whose own cousin has been tried for murder.'

The interview being at an end, Rosamond rose, and with great outward composure, but an inward beating at the heart, retired once more to the solitude of her own room. Once there, she threw off her composure like a loose garment, and her excitement began at length to show itself in two bright spots, one burning on either cheek.

'A little more of this would work me

into a nervous fever,' she said. 'Thank God it is nearly over, and that by this time to-morrow I shall have quitted Armstead, I hope for ever!'

She walked straight over to her writing-desk, took out a sheet of pink note-paper, and sat down to write the letter which was to set George Aldyn free. As soon as the task was accomplished, she rang for her maid.

'Osborne,' she said, 'have this letter sent to the Rectory at once. I wish it to be delivered to Mr. George Aldyn to-night. You need not return to me to-night. I will undress myself; but you must rise early in the morning to pack my things, as we leave Armstead to-morrow before midday.'

'Leave Armstead, miss?'

'Yes; and if Mr. George Aldyn calls at

the Castle in the morning, remember I shall not be at home!'

But George Aldyn had no intention of calling. Less than an hour after the letter had been despatched to the Rectory, there came a tap at Rosamond's door, and the maid handed her mistress a sealed note. After carefully closing and locking her door again and adjusting the pink shade of her lamp, Rosamond opened the note and read as follows:

'MY DEAR MISS LEIGH,

'Perhaps you are right. I gladly give you the freedom which you have asked of me, and bid you adieu.

'Yours, etc.,

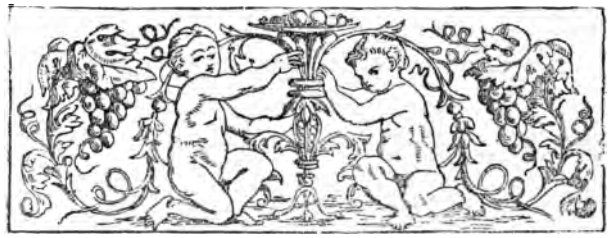
'GEORGE ALDYN.'

A curt epistle enough from a man who

had just been thrown over, thought Rosamond, and, with an actual pain at her heart, she read the letter over again. She was free now, but a good deal of the sweetness was taken from her freedom by the character of that note. In her heart she cared no more for George Aldyn than he did for her; indeed it would not have cost her a moment's uneasiness if she had thought she was doomed never to see his face again, but the knowledge that he could so easily renounce her wounded her self-love and almost made her wish that she had not been quite so precipitate in setting him free.

It was this feeling of wounded pride which made her again turn her thoughts to Conn Dunraven, made her wish that for one brief moment she could stand again with his strong arms clasped around her,

his lips pressed passionately against her own. It had been pleasant to feel that she was so well loved, even when she knew she could give no love in return. How staunch and true he had been through all this trouble! Yes, when she had faltered and failed he had remained firm; and although by involving her he could have saved himself, he had not spoken. Who could help admiring such a man? Although Rosamond had grown terribly afraid of him, she could not but respect him, and she felt that night that she would give a good deal just to see him once again.



CHAPTER XIII.

"MADGE!—MY LITTLE SISTER."

AT that moment Conn was thinking of Rosamond. It was not very late; the clock which stood on the chimney-piece had not long ceased chiming ten, but most of the inmates of the cottage, weary with the fatigue and excitement of the day, had gone to rest. But the young man was still up; he stood near the fire; his right foot rested on the fender, his elbow on the chimney-piece; his head

bowed and supported by his half-closed hand. Half an hour before, he had risen to say good-night to his father and Madge. Having done so, he took up that position on the hearth, and since then he had scarcely stirred. Once or twice he raised his eyes and looked wearily round the room—at the shaded lamp, burning dimly on the table—the flowers which had come like peace-offerings from the Rectory, and which were now softly illuminated by the rays of lamp-light—at the fire flickering faintly in the grate; but wherever he looked he saw only one thing, Rosamond's face; not as he had seen it that day in court, but as it had often before appeared to him: with the passionate lips curved into a smile, the eyes bright with reflected gladness, gazing serenely into his own.

He was hardly thinking; his brain was too excited for that; but in his ears he heard strange voices whispering her name, and wherever his gaze wandered he saw her image.

As he stood thus the door of the room quietly opened, and Madge came in. He had not heard her approach—he did not move—so she paused for a moment at the door to look at him. She had gone upstairs when her uncle went; but on reaching her room she had not attempted to prepare for bed. She had merely exchanged her dress for a dressing-gown, and, having done so, she took a chair by her fire, and waited for her uncle to get to bed in order that she might return to the parlour and speak to Conn without the fear of interruption.

For more than two months now she had

not been able to speak privately to her cousin. While he was in prison the warder had been present at their interviews; since he had been set at liberty, only a few hours had passed; and during those few hours his father had been continually by his side. So far so good; Madge had had little of a private nature to communicate to her cousin, and no harm had been done. But now it was different. Conn was free, and Madge saw, or fancied she saw, that he intended to seize the first opportunity of visiting Rosamond.

If he should go to her, if he should learn from her lips the bitter truth, she dreaded to think what new calamity might occur; it would be far better, Madge thought, that he should learn from herself the exact state of affairs. It was not a pleasant task to perform, but Madge determined not to shrink

from it; for she owed Conn a debt of gratitude which she could never repay.

She walked forward and laid her hand gently on his arm. Conn looked up wearily.

'Well, Madge,' he said, 'what have you come back for? I thought you went to bed half an hour ago.'

'No, I did not intend to go to bed. I want to talk to you, Conn; sit down.'

Mechanically he obeyed her. He drew forward a chair, sat down close to her side, and continued to gaze wearily at the smouldering ashes in the grate. For a time they remained silent; Madge did not know exactly how to begin what she had to say, and Conn was so pre-occupied that he seemed almost to have forgotten the fact of her presence there. Presently, however, he raised his head and their eyes met.

'Well, Madge?' he queried again, forcing a forlorn smile; and Madge said quietly:

'Uncle Patrick was thinking that as soon as you got free, it would be better for us all to leave Armstead and go back to Ballymoy. What do you think, Conn? would you like to go? You surely would not wish to stay here after all that has taken place!'

'No,' he returned, 'I don't mean to stay here even if my father does; but before I go I have some affairs to settle.'

Their eyes met, and he coloured: the next moment she eagerly seized his hand.

'Conn!'

'Well, Madge?'

'You are thinking of *her*, of Miss Leigh! For all our sakes cast her from your

thoughts. Do not attempt to see her again."

Then, before he had time to reply, she told him all. To her amazement Conn listened to it all without a sign of surprise.

'You can't tell me more about Rosamond than I know,' he returned, in a low and tremulous voice, when at length she paused. 'She was aware all along that I was guiltless; for when that shot was fired I was holding her in my arms! And yet, Madge, she stood in court and swore she never saw me that night! How did she know but what her evidence might be my death? and if it had been, she would not have cared. I was a prisoner then, luckily for her; but I am a free man now, thank God!'

He had risen, and in his excitement

began pacing up and down the room. Madge rose, too, and took his arm.

'Promise me, Conn, that you will not go near Miss Leigh.'

Conn turned quickly, and she saw that his face was set in terrible resolve.

'No, Madge, I won't promise; for I mean to see her even if I have to force my way into Rigby Castle. Every night when I lay down on that wretched prison bed, I said to myself that if ever I got a free man, we two should meet again; and we shall meet—she shall face me once again—just for a little while!'

He spoke so wildly, he set his teeth so dangerously, that Madge grew afraid.

'Conn,' she said, 'for pity's sake do not harm the girl; she is not worth your anger. Since you know she can be nothing to you, let her go.'

'Oh, don't be afraid! I won't *harm* her, he said, with a wild laugh.

'Then do not go to see her at all. No good will come of it, and perhaps it may involve you in troubles still greater than those which have just passed away. Oh, Conn, if you only knew, it would be better, far better, that you should try to forget!'

'Forget,' he repeated wearily. 'I don't think it's very easy to forget, Madge. You don't know all I've suffered; you don't know all that Rosamond was to me—and you can't understand. For her I would have sacrificed my life; but when *she* came into court and tried to swear that life away, she almost broke my heart. God alone knows what I suffered then. I shouldn't have cared if they had hung me, so long as *she* was not there to see!'

'Oh, Conn!'

'All that night I longed for the end to come; but the next morning I craved again for life, for I wanted to be a free man in order to come face to face again with her. God help her if I had done so then—God help us both—for I was in a murderous mood, and I don't know what I might have been tempted to do. . . . Madge, Madge!' he said, bending down to look into the pale beautiful face, which was raised so sadly to his, 'if Rosamond had been like *you*—if she had had your steadfast nature and loving heart—she would have made a man of me; but now, God knows what will become of me! She has crushed out my heart and embittered my nature: she has cast a shadow on my life that I can never shake away!'

'Then, since that is so, why not cease to think of her at all?'

'Cease to think of her? As well tell the rain not to fall, or the wind not to blow, as ask me not to think of Rosamond! I know she doesn't care for me, no, or for any living thing—I know she wouldn't have lost a night's rest if I had been sent to spend my life in the hulks—and yet if she came to me again as she used to come, if I felt her warm hand in mine again, and again heard her say she loved me, I believe I should forget all this trouble and take her back again. . . . My God, just see how my hand trembles! I believed I was a man till to-night; but the thought of her has unstrung me again!'

As he spoke he walked excitedly up and down the room; now and then he ran his trembling fingers through his hair, or wiped away the sweat which stood in beads upon his forehead. Madge did not speak to him;

she saw that it would be useless. Presently he paused and took a seat beside her.

'Madge, my little sister,' he said, gently taking her hand and pressing it between his own, 'don't think I forget all that you have suffered; don't think I haven't any pity for that wretched creature who came to take my place. I have. I would bear it all again just for that one day in court; just to hear that man speak of *you* as he did that day! I felt very proud of you, Madge darling. I knew that at that moment I was being snatched as it were from death to life; but I never thought of that. I looked over at you, standing so pale and quiet, and I thanked God that at least there was one woman in the world who had a true woman's heart!'

'That is all over, Conn! do not think of that!'

'But I must think of it, Madge; and every time I think of it I pray to God that you may be spared such torture as mine. Some day, mavourneen, you too will learn to love—for you have a loving little heart, Madge—but my curse upon the man who brings one moment's pain to *you!*'

He paused, and in the room there was a dull, dead silence. Madge's eyes were bent earnestly on the fire; her hands still lay clasped in her cousin's palms. Conn was bending towards her; his face was close to hers. Her heart beat peacefully; it did not flutter when she raised her eyes and gazed at her cousin, though Conn looked handsomer than she had ever seen him look before. She put her arm around his neck and kissed his cheek. At that moment she, too, thanked God, who in His mercy had swept from her heart the foolish

girlish passion which she had once felt for her cousin, and replaced it by a deep, grave, steadfast affection. It was better so. The foolish dream had faded; and though in its fading it had brought her some pain, Madge knew that she had been spared many bitter years of woe.

'This talk with you has done me good, Madge,' said Conn, at length breaking through the dead silence of the room; 'but you must go up to bed—see, it's almost one o'clock. . . . Oh, you needn't fear to leave me,' he added, seeing her hesitate. 'I'm cooler now. But if it will make you more contented, I will go up to my room too!'

He lit his bed candle, turned out the lamp, and, taking Madge's hand in his, passed with her up the stairs.

'Good-night, mavourneen,' he said, as

the two paused by Madge's bedroom-door. 'Why, how pale your cheeks are still . . . these late hours will wear you out. Try to forget all this, and rest!'

Conn went to his room, but knowing it was useless to court sleep that night, he put his candle on the table and sat down again to think. It seemed to him that the tragedy of his life had not yet come to an end, for he was determined, come what might, to stand again face to face with Rosamond Leigh.

CHAPTER XIV.

FASCINATION.

AT nine o'clock the next morning Rosamond awoke from a heavy sleep, drew up the blind which covered her bedroom window, and looked out. Her eye rested upon a landscape of blighted meadows and leafless trees.

'Charming weather,' she said, as she drew down the blind again and turned away; 'and experience teaches me to

expect it to last at least a fortnight. Well, I am a prisoner no longer—I can escape within an hour if I choose; but now that I really can go, I seem to wish to stay. Suppose I do stay—just for a day or so—just until my maid has properly prepared my things. There really seems to me no reason why I should beat so hasty a retreat!'

She reflected on the interview which, she had had on the preceding night with Lord Rigby, and remembered with pleasure that, although she had told him she wished to leave Armstead, she had not fixed her departure for any definite time. Under the circumstances it would be quite easy for her to linger—indeed she knew his lordship would not expect her to leave the castle for several days at least.

Of course her sole object in wishing to

remain was to get a last glimpse of Conn Dunraven. She acknowledged this to herself without the slightest twinge of shame. It was only natural, she thought, that she should wish to shake hands and part from her lover in kindness; there would be no danger in such a course. When the news of his liberation was brought to her, she had been rendered nervous and afraid; a night's sleep, a few hours' reflection, told her how silly she had been. Conn would never expose or harm her; he loved her far too well.

So Rosamond lingered, excusing her delay on the plea of nervous headache, which railway-travelling would increase, but which perfect quiet and seclusion might ultimately take away. She still possessed George Aldyn's curt cold letter —perhaps it was this which made her

more and more anxious to see Conn. She could not go away to strangers feeling so unloved. Though she would not marry Conn Dunraven, she was quite willing at a word to renew the relations which had already existed between them.

Meanwhile Conn, quite unconscious of the workings of Rosamond's mind, remained in the little cottage watching the dull days go slowly by. He dreaded to go out, for two reasons. First, because he shrank with positive horror from appearing openly in the village, and next, because he dreaded to meet Rosamond in public. His return to Armstead, though it had been long expected, stirred up the popular excitement which had been first aroused by the untimely death of Lord Rigby. Everybody was anxious to see him; not that his features were strange to

the villagers, but because it was a novelty to look upon a gentleman who had lived for two or three months in a common gaol, and who had very narrowly escaped being publicly executed as a murderer.

But it was dreary work, and Conn's impatient spirit soon chafed at the restraint. After three days' confinement he came forth.

He was a curiosity at first, and everybody gazed upon him as such. They had expected to see a cropped head, and perhaps a few other indications of convict life. But to a casual observer Conn looked much the same as usual—so he was very soon treated with the usual indifference.

He had not come out with any definite purpose: he had merely wished to familiarise himself with the facts of walking abroad and meeting people face to face; consequently he had waited until the daylight had faded

and evening gloom, as well as evening quietness, was stealing over the village; but no sooner did he find himself among the familiar lanes, than he felt a wild wish to go up to the river, and gaze upon the scenes where he had drunk in so much happiness as well as so much woe. It was a wild wish, the wish of a madman, and as it took possession of him he resolutely came to a stand; but impulse is stronger than reason sometimes, and after a momentary pause he walked on. He had not proceeded far when he again paused.

'This is cruel folly,' he said; 'I will not go near her!' And he walked resolutely back to his home.

That very night, as Rosamond's maid was brushing out the long thick tresses of her mistress's hair, she casually mentioned the fact that, as she had been walking

through the village during the evening, she had met 'young Mr. Dunraven.' As Rosamond did not now seem inclined to check the flow of talk, the girl proceeded to say, that when she caught the first glimpse of the young man her nerves had got a shock, he was so changed; not at all like the handsome young gentleman he had been before they cast him into prison: but when, on coming up to him, she made him a respectful curtsey, he had given her 'good-evening' with such a smile as quite won her heart.

'He was always a kind-hearted young gentleman, miss; little wonder if he does take this trouble to heart. People do say in the village that the Irish family will be all leaving Armstead soon. They've got a fine castle, they say, in Ireland, and plenty of land of their own, and they're going

back to it. Mrs. Turner, that's the landlady of the "Silent Woman," you know, miss, says that the news of this affair has got over to their place in Ireland, and that their tenants are all up in arms, and that grand preparations are being made to welcome young Mr. Dunraven back.'

'Nonsense, Osborne! I've no doubt it's all idle gossip.'

'Very likely indeed, miss, for they do say such things; and I'm sure it don't seem rational for people to leave a fine castle, and come to a bit of a cottage, such as they've got here.'

The maid rattled on in the same style for some minutes, then, having finished what she had to do, retired.

Left to herself, Rosamond, habited now in a loose dressing-gown, and with her hair falling loose about her shoulders, sank into

an easy-chair, turned up her reading-lamp, and took a book. She did not read, however; for in a very few minutes she was carelessly nibbling the corner of the cover, while her eyes rested thoughtfully on the carpet. The events of the last few days had certainly not improved her temper. She had grown very petulant, dissatisfied with everybody, including herself; and all because she had had no opportunity of seeing Conn again. She wanted him, yet she did not want him; she yearned to leave Armstead, yet of her own free will she lingered. If Conn, on being released from prison, had immediately sought her presence, it is certain that Rosamond would have given him a cold adieu, and have taken her departure from Armstead without a moment's unnecessary delay. It was because he did not seek her, and

thereby conveyed to her the idea that he was indifferent, that the girl overcame her fear, and actually thought of seeking *him.*

Three days had passed since she had ordered her maid to prepare for their immediate departure, and there was now no tangible excuse for her to linger on. She had communicated to Lord Rigby the result of her letter to George Aldyn: seemingly very well satisfied with the termination of the engagement, he had given it as his opinion that, all things considered, Rosamond would be wise to quit Armstead for some little time. A season in London, he suggested, would do her a great deal of good. He should be always happy to do what he could for her, and his relatives would be only too pleased to introduce her to their circle of friends.

A brilliant prospect for a girl who loved

society overmuch, and who had hitherto been compelled to spend her life in a dreary English village. Twelve months before, Rosamond would have been overjoyed at such a chance; now she coolly thanked his lordship, and intimated that directly she felt herself equal to the fatigue of the journey, she would be glad to go.

As she sat that night, she thought over all these things, and felt even more petulant than ever. It was certain she could not remain much longer at Rigby Castle; it was equally certain she would not leave Armstead without once again seeing her lover. What had at first been a slight wish, now grew with nursing into a morbid craving—a craving which had been increased that night by those few words of her maid. While the girl had been describing Conn's look and smile, Rosa-

mond had been wondering whether his handsome face would have worn the same look, the same smile, if, instead of seeing her maid, he had suddenly seen *her!* At the very thought the girl's heart bounded, her cheek flushed. She felt that the last few days would have been well spent if they had brought her one more passionate look, one more wild embrace, from Conn Dunraven.

CHAPTER XV.

GOOD-BYE, SWEETHEART.

THE next day Rosamond breakfasted in her own room, and shortly after breakfast went for her usual walk.

The path she chose was a lonely one, and it had been a favourite with her in earlier days. It led through the plantation, along the bank of the river, not far from the very spot where she had first met Conn. To-day the scene had a peculiar

fascination for her, and she lingered along, looking about her with strange interest. When she came to the spot where she had first seen the young Irishman quarrelling with Scott the keeper, she sat down upon a stile, and relapsed into a waking dream. How quiet it was around her! The water beside her slipped slowly along over its pebbly bed, making a gentle murmur, and above her head the sky stretched clear and blue. There was not a soul to be seen anywhere ; she was quite alone. Now and then there was borne to her upon the wind faint sounds from the far-off village—that was all.

She sat resting for some time ; then again her spirit prompted her to move. She rose to her feet, and turning, looked at the village. There it lay, a bright bit of colour upon the side of the hill, indicated by

the tremulous lights from a pale blue sky. Rosamond remained for a time gazing steadfastly upon it, at the comfortable farms, the stretches of meadow-land threaded with silvern streamlets, the church tower rising majestically from the mass of foliage which covered the Rectory grounds, the spire still pointing silently to the sky; then her eyes fell upon the quaint grey moss-grown bridge which spanned the river, and which to her sun-dazzled eyes looked old and crumbling to dust. And all the time she was looking she was wondering whether, if she were to walk that way, she would be likely to meet one well-known form. She had not arrived at any definite decision when, ten minutes later, she turned round to sit again.

She turned, but she did not sit; her feet seemed suddenly to become rooted to the

ground, for there on the river's bank, slowly approaching the spot where she stood, was the very man she sought.

The first shock being over, the absolute certainty of his near neighbourhood established, Rosamond began to feel her old fear of him returning, and she wondered whether or not she should stand her ground. There was yet ample time for her to run—Conn was a good distance off—so far indeed, that had Rosamond not been well acquainted with his walk and figure, she would not have been able to recognise him at all. Yes, there was plenty of time for her to get away—but should she go? It seemed ridiculous even to entertain such a thought, especially as she had lingered on so long in Armstead with no other object in view than the thought of seeing and speaking with him.

At length she decided to remain. She sat down, half hiding herself behind the stem of a huge lime-tree, and waited for him to approach.

He came on slowly, moodily, searching curiously along the ground, and apparently quite unconscious that any one was by. Rosamond could not see him now, her back was turned his way; but very soon she heard the long grass which grew on the river's bank rustle by his ever-approaching footsteps, and at the sound she turned quite faint. Why would her heart beat so painfully? why could she not keep her hands from trembling? She wanted to meet him calmly, not with a tear-choked voice and frightened fluttering form.

Conn had evidently not noticed her presence, for he came quietly on; when he reached the spot where, on that terrible

night, Lord Rigby had breathed his last, he paused and looked steadily at the river. As he did so, he seemed to live through all that time again. His heart sickened within him. He was about to turn and leave the spot, when he suddenly felt the light touch of a hand upon his arm, and raising his head he looked straight into Rosamond's eyes.

He was changed—ah, yes, he was much changed. She saw that at a glance. He was no longer the love-sick youth—her handsome inferior whom she could play with, pamper, and throw aside at will. Here was a man, a man too whom she instinctively felt to be her master; and seeing this, Rosamond felt her old fascination for him returning in one quick electric thrill. How handsome he looked, too! handsomer than ever, she thought!

No wonder she had been unable to resist the lure of love-speeches and kisses from such lips as those ; no wonder she had cast prudence to the winds and risked anything for the embraces of such a man !

And there *she* stood, just as she had stood that night in the Rectory garden, with the same half-petulant, half-tearful look on her face, the same quiver on her prettily-curved lips, the same light in her eyes which then had maddened Conn and forced him, almost despite himself, to bend caressingly above her, and whisper with burning lips, 'Rosamond, do you love me?' That was several months ago ; and though she was winsome as ever, the situation now was woefully changed. As her delicately-gloved fingers rested for a moment on his coat-sleeve, she was sensible that a convulsive tremor passed through his

frame; for a moment his face was tortured, but turning, he looked at her with terribly stern eyes.

'Well?' he said, in a hard deep voice.

Had Conn offered her a caress, in all probability she would have shrunk away, and have found it tolerably easy to leave him; but as he frowned at her she drooped her eyes and stood like a criminal before him.

'Mr. Dunraven,' she said softly, and it was well she did not know what those soft tones made him endure, 'I was sitting by the tree when I saw you coming, and I waited to—to shake hands!'

Timidly she extended her hand—she took another appealing glance into his face. Conn returned her look: he did not take her hand.

'I don't see that to shake hands would

do any good to either of us,' he said; 'if you have only waited here for that, you had better let me go!'

'Is that all you have to say to me?'

'Yes—that's all!'

Still neither moved. Rosamond would not; Conn could not; for, despite his outward coldness and the curt nature of his replies, he felt that the girl's very presence entirely deprived him of his self-command. For a minute there was a dead silence. Then Rosamond timidly raised her eyes; she saw that *his* were fixed on the far-off village. She spoke again.

'Can you let me go with no better farewell than that?' she said quietly. 'Do you find it so easy to forget?'

He turned towards her this time, and Rosamond, gazing at him with tear-dimmed

eyes, saw that intense mental agony was written on every lineament of his face.

'No,' he said, 'I can't forget; if I could, I might find it easy to shake hands with you now! But take my advice, don't linger here with me, or God only knows how this meeting may end! Whatever happens,' he continued, coming a step or two nearer, 'you will be to blame. *I* didn't seek you, remember that, for I felt I couldn't trust myself to come face to face with you again. Now go—while you can!'

'But I cannot go,' returned Rosamond, though her cheeks turned pale with absolute fear. 'I cannot leave you, and have those words for ever ringing in my ears. You are very cruel. You blame me for acting as I did; what else could I do? I thought *you*, at least, would not wish me to be publicly disgraced.'

'Then you thought it a public disgrace to acknowledge your acquaintance with me?'

'No,' she said softly; 'the disgrace was in having met you in such places, at such hours of the night!'

He looked at her for a moment in silence: then he approached her with outstretched hands.

'Rosamond,' he said, 'suppose I said "I forgive you!" suppose I could *force* myself to forget—what then?'

'I should think, perhaps, that your love was noble—worthy all the pain and trouble which we have both had to endure!'

'My love—but what of yours? Rosamond, once more—yes, I will say it—will you redeem your promise? would you marry me if I said—"Rosamond, I forgive you?"'

This time she shrank away, and cover-

ing her face with her hands, murmured, sobbing:

'Oh, pray, pray do not ask that now!'

'So *that* is your answer, and yet you come here to-day to make me talk of love! Merciful God, do you know what you are doing—do you know what you *have* done to me? A little more of this, and I think I shall kill you!'

She raised her face now, and uttered a cry. No one heard! She turned to leave the place, but she turned too late. Ere she could move two steps she found herself utterly powerless, clasped in Conn's strong arms.

She tried to struggle, she could not. With his right arm he held her firmly against his breast; with his left hand he raised her face; then, in a hot frenzy of passion, he covered her face, her cheeks,

her lips, with kisses. At last his arms loosened, and she was free.

Her face was scarlet: she rubbed her scented handkerchief across her lips, and stared at him, panting with angry scorn.

'You are a coward!' she exclaimed.

This time Conn was silent: the flush of his furious passion being over, he felt half ashamed of what he had done.

'And now, sir,' continued Rosamond, 'having taken advantage of my helplessness to insult me, do you give me leave to go?'

Still he did not answer her: and Rosamond, afraid now to linger, passed rapidly along the river bank and left him alone.

* * * * *

'So ends the last episode of my country romance,' soliloquised Rosamond that night as she sat in her room, with fragrant scents in the air all round her, and a soft pink

light just touching the lids of her drooping eyes. 'Well, perhaps it is better so! had he not insulted me with that last rude embrace, I might have carried away in my breast some tender feeling for him, which would sooner or later have caused me pain! As it is, I suppose I shall always be able to sleep peacefully!'

The next morning she left Armstead. Conn saw her go. He was strolling through the village when Lord Rigby's carriage and pair dashed past him on its way to the station. He caught one glimpse of Rosamond's face; even then it came like a gleam of sunshine, for as it passed away it seemed to him as if the prospect had become suddenly blackened with coming storm.

CHAPTER XVI.

GEORGE FORSAKES THE CHURCH.

'DO you mean to tell me, sir,' said Mr. Aldyn, 'that after the money which I have spent on your education, after I have secured a good opening for you as a preacher of the Word, you positively refuse to be ordained?'

George looked quietly into his father's excited face, and answered coolly enough:

'Yes, I do refuse; my mission is not the Church!'

'Confound your mission! I didn't know before that you had any!'

The young man shrugged his shoulders.

'And so,' he could not help retorting, 'you thought you'd put me into the Church! Well, father, you made the blunder, and I bear the brunt of it. But do not get angry; let us discuss the matter quietly. There is nothing so very awful in it, that you need take it so much to heart. I have been unfortunate, perhaps, in discovering my mistake rather late in life; but after all I'm only four-and-twenty. I could spare a few years for hard work, and then not be an old man!'

'And during those few years of hard work, what is to become of Rosamond Leigh?'

'I don't in the least know!'

'Do you imagine that she will share

your privations, or be willing to sit quietly in a corner until you have gone through the drudgery of learning another profession ?'

'I had not taken Rosamond into my calculations at all.'

'Indeed! then perhaps you mean to tell me that, after throwing in my face the profession which I selected for you, you intend to jilt the girl whom I arranged for you to marry!'

'No,' returned George quietly; 'to renounce the Church and renounce a woman are two very different things. If I do not consider myself a good enough man to become a clergyman, I certainly do not consider myself a bad enough man to be capable of breaking faith with a woman. I discovered several months ago that I cared as little for Miss Leigh as she evidently did for me. I saw that we were

utterly unsuited to one another, and that if we did marry there wouldn't be much happiness in store for us after the wedding-day was over. Still, as she seemed willing to carry out her compact, I held to mine. I should have still held to it, I should have put my own feelings aside and married her; but thank God I have been spared as great a humiliation as could ever have fallen to the lot of man!'

'What do you mean, sir?' asked the rector, trembling at the very suspicion of the new revelation which his son was about to make.

George quietly opened his coat, produced his pocket-book, and drew from its leaves a sheet of delicate pink note-paper, which he handed to his father. The rector took the letter, opened it with trembling hands, and read it through. It

was neatly worded, full of regrets and vows of eternal friendship; but covertly hinting through it all that the fair writer, now that she was possessed of her fortune, had no longer any desire to link her fortunes with a family, some members of which had actually passed within the shadow of the gallows, and therefore demanded her liberty. When George Aldyn had read the note he had been fully alive to all its covert meaning; hence the curt epistle which he had sent in reply. His father did not notice the sneer at all. Having read the note he folded it absently, and looked to his son for an explanation.

'You answered this, George?'

'Of course—the very night I received it. I did not wish to keep her in suspense.'

'And what did you say?'

'What do you suppose I could say in answer to such a note as that?'

'A thousand things.'

'Tell me one. Under the circumstances how would you have behaved?'

'I should have gone to her and pointed out the utter inconsistency of acting in such a way as that. She has no right to throw you over. When Lord Rigby was alive, and she had nothing, only the prospect of a few thousand pounds, you were willing to marry her. Now she has got a a certainty and is worth marrying, you should hold her to her bond.'

'You see she does not care for me; and I tell you frankly I care as little for her!'

'George, do you want to drive me mad? Confound your calf love, and hers too! If

you happened to have it, it wouldn't last long!'

'Probably not. Still I have gradually come round to the belief that it is as well to have a little sentiment at the outset of married life. Rightly or wrongly, I gleefully gave Rosamond Leigh her liberty; and the night I wrote her letter, I resolved to give up all ideas of entering the Church. As I had been mercifully saved from committing one sin, I resolved, in gratitude to Providence, to save myself from committing another. Since I cannot honestly sign the articles, I will not add another to the list of humbugs whose lives are a delusion.'

'You are a fool, sir; an ungrateful fool.'

'Perhaps—and I think I'd sooner be a fool than a knave.'

'Well, go your own way; do just as you

please; but be good enough never to consult me again, for I wash my hands of you. A few months of beggary and starvation will soon overcome your scruples, I've no doubt, and make you respect sound sense!'

'I expect it *will* be beggary for me unless you give me your help. I have been trained for the Church, remember; I cannot adopt another profession at a moment's notice.'

'Then I will not give you a farthing. When you are ready to listen to common sense—when you tell me you are willing to be ordained, and accept the condition in life which I have provided for you, come to me; until then you are no son of mine.'

Without waiting to hear another word, Mr. Aldyn sallied from the room, and,

having found his wife, proceeded to pour his grievances into her ear.

'The boy is an utter fool!' he said; 'but I'll bring him to his senses before long. I've been too liberal with him, and he's got his head turned. If I had made him my own curate several years ago, and insisted that he lived on a curate's pittance, he wouldn't have treated me with such insolence to-day; but because he has been kept in luxury for four-and-twenty years—because he has had a comfortable living provided for him, he thinks it right to sneer and say it's not his mission. The fellow's a perfect atheist! I wonder what his mission will be when he's starving and comes to me for help!'

To all of this Mrs. Aldyn said little; she was very much disappointed at the strange behaviour of her son, and she

resolved to try as soon as possible how far her own powers of persuasion would go towards altering his decision. Nevertheless, she had the inward satisfaction of knowing that if he persisted in adhering to his decision, and if the rector was equally determined to refuse him assistance, she would be able to help him a little out of her own private means.

Meanwhile George Aldyn, sitting where his father had left him, was reviewing the scene which had just taken place between them in anything but a pleasant frame of mind. Weeks ago he knew that such a scene would be inevitable, and he was rather glad than otherwise that it was over; but he felt pained at the part his father had thought fit to play.

'Christianity,' he said to himself, 'has come to a pretty pass when such men as—

well, as my own father—prosper on the fat of the land. Fine philosophy he has preached to me to-day! Just such philosophy as in the old days I used to preach to Madge. He knows I have no mission for the Church, and yet he would have me make a trade of religion; uphold creeds which I have no faith in, just in order to live in a fine house, drive my own carriage, and drink good wine. There was a time when I was contemptible enough to lend myself to such a course—when I thought that being no greater a humbug than the rest, and having perhaps a shade more conscience, there would be no possible harm in my taking the good things which came in my way. And I could have done it. If I had never met Madge Dunraven, I should to-day, I expect, be a clergyman with a comfortable home and a rich wife all

of my own. . . . Madge, Madge," he continued, 'you have taught me a lifelong lesson, my darling! When you could bravely face such troubles as yours, why should I shrink from mine? Even as you kept faith with your conscience, I will try, with the help of God, not to sin against my own. Little one, you have often scoffed at me! you have often blamed me! when you hear what I have done to-day, I wonder if you will give me one little word of praise? . . . I'll go and see her; I'll tell her my plans, and just hear what she will say!'

He left the Rectory and walked down towards the cottage, taking the road along which half an hour before the Rigby carriage had rolled, bearing away Rosamond Leigh. When he reached the cottage he found that Madge was not at home; she had gone up to Gresham that

very morning. George Aldyn little guessed that she had been called to visit the man, Matthew Dalton, who then lay in gaol under sentence of death.

CHAPTER XVII.

SENTENCED TO DEATH.

WHEN Conn Dunraven had regained his liberty, the excitement aroused in the upper circles of society by the inquiry into Lord Rigby's death had gradually subsided. The case seemed practically ended. It was nothing to respectable people that there still lay in Gresham gaol a pitiable creature whose days and nights were haunted by a sense of sickening fear for the future, and vain

regrets for the past. The man had confessed his guilt; he must receive his punishment, and there would be an end of the whole matter. Even George Aldyn, absorbed in the complication of his own affairs, had for the time being ceased altogether to think of the man; and as for the rector, he put the existence of so common a criminal completely from his mind. But Mr. Aldyn, hard as he was upon the miserable outcast, was still harder upon Madge. This last act of hers, this harbouring and screening of a murderer—a course of conduct which brought ignoble disgrace upon a family so nearly connected with himself—made him literally detest her.

But Madge, quite indifferent to the opinions which her curious conduct had aroused, continued to watch with painful interest the sad fortunes of the wretched

man, who, to save her cousin, had sacrificed his own life. He was powerless, and so poor as to be utterly at the mercy of the law. Still he was not friendless. Mr. Dunraven employed the counsel who had worked so assiduously for Conn, and bade him now do his best for the new prisoner.

'Yes, Madge, it will cost money,' said Mr. Dunraven; 'but, please God, we'll put another mortgage on Shranamonragh rather than leave the poor miserable soul at the mercy of all the rogues!'

So another trial began, and the wretched man was placed in the dock, where he stood like a man of stone. He seemed to be looking at a face which to other eyes was quite invisible—to be listening to a voice which no one else could hear. But at length he was rudely aroused from his

you happened to have it, it wouldn't last long!'

'Probably not. Still I have gradually come round to the belief that it is as well to have a little sentiment at the outset of married life. Rightly or wrongly, I gleefully gave Rosamond Leigh her liberty; and the night I wrote her letter, I resolved to give up all ideas of entering the Church. As I had been mercifully saved from committing one sin, I resolved, in gratitude to Providence, to save myself from committing another. Since I cannot honestly sign the articles, I will not add another to the list of humbugs whose lives are a delusion.'

'You are a fool, sir; an ungrateful fool.'

'Perhaps—and I think I'd sooner be a fool than a knave.'

'Well, go your own way; do just as you

please; but be good enough never to consult me again, for I wash my hands of you. A few months of beggary and starvation will soon overcome your scruples, I've no doubt, and make you respect sound sense!'

'I expect it *will* be beggary for me unless you give me your help. I have been trained for the Church, remember; I cannot adopt another profession at a moment's notice.'

'Then I will not give you a farthing. When you are ready to listen to common sense—when you tell me you are willing to be ordained, and accept the condition in life which I have provided for you, come to me; until then you are no son of mine.'

Without waiting to hear another word, Mr. Aldyn sallied from the room, and,

was led to understand that you were friendless ?'

'Well, perhaps I am; but I should like to speak to Miss Dunraven.'

Thus it was that Madge, sitting at her breakfast one morning, received a letter, the first sight of which gave her an unpleasant start. On further examination it proved to be an official intimation from the chaplain of Gresham gaol informing her that the criminal Matthew Dalton, who was at that time lying in the gaol under sentence of death, wished to have an interview with her before capital sentence was carried into execution. The date fixed for her visit to the gaol was three days subsequent to that on which the note had been written. The request touched Madge's heart, and as she folded the paper and put it in her pocket, her eyes

filled with tears. The days seemed to her very long in passing, but at length the time came for her to go.

It was a bright spring day, made joyous by occasional gleams of sunlight; the world, awakening from its torpor, was giving forth and receiving new joys each hour. Everything seemed brightening to light and life, instead of sinking to death and decay. The barren branches of the trees were gradually gathering greenness, the whole air was redolent with sweet scents from wood and flower. Even Gresham had grown gayer beneath the gleams of sunlight which followed Madge to the very gates of the gaol.

But once inside, the sunlight faded and left her tremulous and cold.

She had come quite alone.

From the official letter, she had gathered

that the man wished to see no other with her, and now that she stood once again within the dreary prison walls she felt heartily glad that she was by herself. She was admitted by the officer who had opened the gate for her when she had come with her uncle to pay that last visit to Conn; again she crossed the dreary prison-yard, saw pale prisoners taking their daily allowance of cold fresh air; again she heard the cries from the punishment-cells, the feeble moans of the sick, which reached her through the half-open infirmary-door; then almost immediately she found herself standing in the condemned cell, facing the man who only a few days before had received his sentence of death.

A long time had passed since Madge had seen him, and at their last parting he had appeared to her a man elated as with

enthusiasm for some heroic cause; she remembered him distinctly; his flushed cheek and defiant eye, his wild carriage and fearless bearing; and as she recalled that face and form, she seemed to realise for the first time how great was the sacrifice which had been made for her. When the cell-door closed behind her, the man, raising his head, looked straight into her eyes. As he did so, Madge paused, scarcely able to realise the fact that this miserable creature, sitting shivering on his prison-bed, could be Matthew Dalton. She had seen him in many pitiable plights before—the victim of God's elements and man's cruelty, stoned and beaten about like a half-starved beast—but she would never have realised that he could come to such a condition of utter physical despair. His emaciated body was

bent almost double, his thin arms folded around him as if for warmth; his hollow cheeks were ashen grey and deeply furrowed, and his once keen eyes were dim as if with approaching death. He looked at Madge long and steadily, and as he did so, his sunken cheek seemed for a moment to brighten; then he stretched forth his trembling hand:

'I thought you'd come,' he said, 'and you *have* come! Thankee, miss, thankee.'

His manner now was full of subdued respect, and he called her 'miss' almost for the first time. His look was full of sharp wistful entreaty, and when Madge gave him her hand, he took it in both of his, and held it with tremulous fingers. Touched to the heart by his manner, and thrilling to that pitiful pressure, Madge

said quietly, with the tears starting to her eyes:

'Tell me what I can do for you—tell me how I can help you—but tell me first that you forgive me for bringing you to this——'

With a sudden movement, Dalton raised her hand to his lips, and kissed it.

'Don't you cry, my dear,' he said; 'if all the world had done as well by me as you've done, I shouldn't be the man I am, I shouldn't be lying here with the gallows staring me in the face. But I've always been unlucky, and p'r'aps it's just as well that Jack Ketch should end it all! There, don't *you* cry—don't you take on; you've got no cause to be sorry for a bad lot like me!'

'But I am sorry,' said Madge, now

sobbing outright. 'I cannot bear to see you suffer so much. And it was so good of you to stand up and speak the truth! My cousin owes his life to you: we all thank you, we all bless you, for what you've done.'

'It's like you to say that, miss. What I did, I did for your sake, and no one else's on this here earth. If I'd had to die right down on the nail there in open court, I'd have come forward just the same.'

'Ah, but you will not die at all,' said Madge, eagerly; 'you will receive the Queen's mercy, and live on!'

'I don't care to live,' said Dalton, wearily. 'I don't want to be hung like a dog, but I'm sick of this world—and the next, if there is one, can't be a worse. But there,' he added, with something of his old rough determined manner, 'I didn't bring

you here to-day to talk over my bad luck. I want to tell you something that must be off my mind before I go!'

Then Madge heard the man's story. She learned that some twenty years before, the late Lord Rigby was accustomed to spend the greater part of every year on an estate which he owned in the neighbouring county of Culmshire. In a village on this estate lived the Dalton family, the tenants of a small farm. It was but a small family, consisting of an old couple with five grown-up children. One was Matthew Dalton, a good-natured ne'er-do-well, who, from boyhood upwards, was ever in trouble of some kind, who was fond of snaring pheasants, and poaching of all sorts, and who had a knack of getting well punished for whatever he happened to do. Of the four daughters, one girl named

Rose, the prettiest of the whole family, became a servant in the house of the reigning lord. For many years the Daltons existed there in tolerable comfort, with no trouble save that which Matthew brought, when he was taken before the county magistrates to be punished or reprimanded for his wild escapades in the woods. But by-and-by a more serious sorrow came to them. One night when the old mother sat by the kitchen fire alone, her daughter Rose, creeping into the house, sobbed out upon her breast the truth which she feared she could no longer hide.

'I remember that night,' continued the man gloomily, 'just as if it had been only twenty-four hours ago. I'd stopped out rather late, and had had a drop too much, and when I got home I found father swear-

ing, mother crying, and Rosie on her knees looking so white and bad I couldn't have believed she'd ha' been my pretty sister. Well, they tried to be quiet as soon as they see me; but I got it all out of them, and as soon as I knew all, what did I do but go straight up to the fine house where poor Rosie had lived, and come face to face with the damned scoundrel of a lord. I swore I'd kill him, and by God I believe I should ha' done it too, but he promised to see the old man and make amends. Well, he kept his word; he did see my father, but what amends did he make? He promised that if they'd say nothing he'd say nothing, and that if they'd do as he bid them, poor Rosie's plight should never be known. Well, the old man promised, for he was kind o' broken, d'ye see; so, although I raged, my lord had it all his

own way. Poor Rosie was sent off to pass over her trouble, and three days after her little baby was born, she died; just turned on her side and sobbed herself to sleep because her heart was broken. After poor Rosie was gone, the old people seemed to grow fond of the baby; but when its father offered to take it and rear it, they thought it only right to let it go; and when he took it away, he gave us money to go off to New Zealand. He wanted to get us all clear away, and he thought we'd all gone, till one day, three years after the baby had been born, I came face to face with my lord again, and told him that the rest had gone out, but that I had stopped in Old England. He turned a bit white at that; then he gave me some money, said it was the last I'd ever get from him, and he hoped never to see my face again. I

asked about poor Rosie's baby, but he wouldn't say a word. Well, I tried to think no more about it: I promised never to trouble him again, and I went on in my old wild way, only getting a bit worse, perhaps, now that I was alone; but one day I found out, no matter how, that he was keeping the child with himself in Rigby Castle, so I made my way to Armstead just to get a sight of her. She was a little girl then, and when I looked at her I seemed to see our Rosie, just as she had been long ago. I looked at her, but I never said a word, for she was dressed in fine silk and ribbons like a real lady, and I found no one knew but she was a lady born. Now that was handsome enough of Lord Rigby, I thought, and as one good turn deserves another, I determined to let him have his way. Ever

since then I've been knocking about the world without a home or a friend, while the man who killed my sister, and turned the old people from their home, has been living the life of an honest man!'

'What became of the child?' asked Madge. She could hardly bring herself to believe that she already knew her only too well.

'The child? Oh, she is all right: his lordship has always looked well after her. She lives up at Rigby Castle now—like a real lady, and they call her Rosamond Leigh!'

'Does she *know*?'

'Not a word. I ain't got much to be thankful for, God knows, but I do feel pleased to think that I never came forward to disgrace her. I feel kind o' glad that when they finish me off she won't know

that her poor dead mother's brother has just been killed for shooting down her own father!'

He dropped his face in his hands, and again sat silent; when he again raised his head, his face was more haggard than it had ever been before.

'My dear,' he continued, again stretching forth towards Madge his long thin trembling hands, 'the only good turn God Almighty ever did to me was to lead me to your door; you've been a kind friend to me, my dear, and it was only my cursed bad luck that ever made me bring you a stroke of harm!'

Madge, quietly wiping the tears from her eyes, took the trembling hands between her own.

'You never brought me such trouble as I have brought to you,' she said. 'When

I heard they had sentenced you I felt as if I were to blame for your death!'

'Don't—don't let us talk about that!' he said suddenly, trembling and shrinking as if in fear. The look of terror on his face was pitiful to behold. Madge saw it, and as she did so her heart seemed to grow as cold as stone.

'God help you!' she exclaimed fervently.

Do you think there is a God as'll care about such as me?' he asked, looking curiously into her tear-dimmed eyes.

'I know there is,' returned Madge, quietly; 'and every day of my life I pray that He may give you help!'

'He hasn't helped me much so far, and if so be as there is a God, He takes precious ittle trouble about you and me.'

'Don't speak like that!' cried Madge, shocked and amazed, in the intense sim-

plicity of her faith. 'God is thinking of us and helping us when we least know it. His ways are not our ways, and we cannot always understand them, because we are only human creatures and very blind.'

Matthew Dalton fixed on her one long lingering look, in which wonder and admiration were strangely blended.

'I tell you what it is, my dear,' he said at last: 'I do believe one thing—that God takes care of *you!*'

'And you! and you!' exclaimed Madge, fervently.

'Well, p'r'aps—and p'r'aps He brought you and me together after all! Lord, I should like to think that, and if I did think it, I'd never go denying God again.'

Once more there was silence; then the man spoke in a soft subdued voice:

'Let me kiss your hand again—there!

now I don't mind what's got to come. Say a prayer for me to-night, my dear; and if there *is* a God above, He'll listen to *you!*'

Then Madge, urged by an irresistible impulse, sank on her knees.

'Let me pray now—for you—for us both—God will hear us!'

And while the man listened abstractedly, scarcely hearing the words, but touched and softened by the spirit-stirring tones of the speaker, Madge poured forth a simple petition to Heaven such as she had heard her priest utter more than once by the bedside of dying men. The prayer, though conventional in form, contained something so simple, so reverent, so intense, and so characteristic of Madge herself, that it moved the listener to tears. When she ceased, his eyes were glistening, his cheeks

were moist, and he drew a great breath as if from the bottom of his heart.

Scarcely had Madge risen to her knees, when the intimation was given that the interview must end. Before leaving the cell Madge remembered to ask:

'What of Miss Leigh—do you wish to see *her*?'

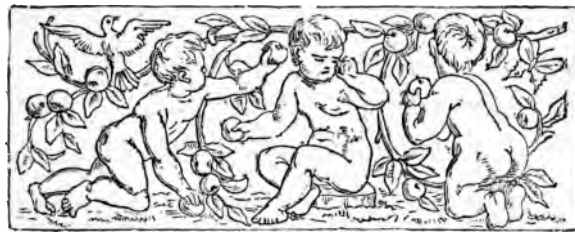
Dalton hesitated as if reflecting, then said decidedly:

'No; I've got all I wanted—that was to see *you!* Good-bye, my dear; you've made a man of me! God bless you, and good-bye!'

Madge, with tearful voice, murmured back that blessing as she moved away.

A few days later, Madge learned that Matthew Dalton had been reprieved from the death sentence, and sentenced to penal

servitude for life. Before finally leaving this unfortunate man, let us take one glance forward. After working for two years in the stone quarries at Portland, Dalton fell upon the sick-list, and one morning the warder, going his round, found him lying on his pallet, quite dead. He had gone to sleep peacefully, it seemed, but his pale lips were pressed to an ivory crucifix which had formerly belonged to Madge Dunraven.



CHAPTER XVIII.

STEPPING WESTWARD.

THREE days after that painful scene with Matthew Dalton in the condemned cell of the prison, Madge sat in the parlour of the little cottage at Armstead, holding another interview. George Aldyn had come to say 'good-bye.' He had laid bare to Madge all his altered plans—he had heard her words of commendation; he now stood looking somewhat anxiously into her face.

Madge sat on a low seat near the window-sill, her hands clasped around her knee, her face half turned from her companion, who stood near. She listened attentively when he spoke; when he paused for a reply, she gave it; but, try as he would, he could not make her raise her eyes to his.

'I am glad you approve of what I have done, Madge,' he said at last, drawing up a chair and taking it close to her side. 'Although I am, as it were, motherless, fatherless, almost friendless, it is happiness enough for me to go away feeling that I possess a little of your esteem.'

'You will not always be as you are; your father will soon forgive you.'

'I don't think so, I saw determination written on his face the very last time I spoke with him. I think he might have been induced to forgive me for renouncing

the Church—always provided I had fixed upon another profession as lucrative, of course; but when he found that my affianced wife had jilted me, he thought it was high time that he too should show me the door. . . . Well, never mind; Miss Leigh did me a good turn when she sent me that letter. I don't believe I could ever have married her, Madge, after you showed me in such a matter-of-fact way what a miserable proceeding it was going to be.'

Again there was silence; again it was broken by George.

'Madge,' he said, lowering his voice to that soft tone which made her heart throb, 'I have given you my confidence; give me yours.'

'Mine?'

'Yes; tell me now what all of you intend

to do. Are you going to continue to live here?'

'Live here? Oh no! Conn is going to America, I think; and Uncle Patrick and I are going back to Ireland.'

'And you will be glad to go?'

'Yes; I could not bear to live in England after all that has happened. Besides, we shall always be much happier amongst our own people, in our own home.'

'And as soon as you get there you will try to forget us and our country?'

'Some of the English I shall certainly try to forget!'

'Me amongst the rest?'

'No, George; I shall never forget *you!*'

A bright flush covered the young man's face. He took her hand in his.

'If I could believe *that*, Madge,' he said,

'there wouldn't be a happier man in England to-day than I am!'

The hand which was clasped in his began to tremble; she rose, and for the first time that day looked into his face.

'What do you mean?' she asked quickly; and he, clasping her hand still tighter in his, replied:

'I mean that if I could entertain the hope that some day in the future—not now, but when I am more worthy—I could win your love, I could go to my work a happy, contented fellow! . . . Madge,' he continued, after a moment's silence, 'do you think you could ever care for me enough to—enough to——'

Again he paused: still Madge made no answer; but their eyes met with new meaning. She hung her head to hide the

crimson blushes on her cheeks, and put another trembling hand in his. George put his arm about her, drew her to his side, and for the first time in his life kissed her on the lips.

'Madge, my darling,' he whispered, 'you have made a new creature of me to-day. Thank God, some good has come to me at last.'

And Madge, regardless of the future, conscious only of the present, felt that she was happy indeed. After all her troubles, it was blissful to find such perfect rest and pleasure as came to her when she could stand with George Aldyn's arms around her—with her cheek resting upon his shoulder. After a time she released herself from his embrace, and again took her seat near the window. George again placed his chair beside her ; but instead of holding

her hand he put his arm around her waist and drew her fondly to his side.

Just a week after that day Madge took her last look at Armstead, and turned her face again towards her Irish home. Two days before, Conn had started for America. Mr. Dunraven and Madge went with him as far as Liverpool, to see him safely on board the vessel which was to take him away. It was a sad parting, and before the final farewell was said Conn himself almost broke down. But, despite the sorrow which Madge felt at parting with her cousin, she knew it was better that he should go. She hoped that the excitement caused by constant travelling and change would help to erase from his mind the memory of Rosamond Leigh. Besides, Conn had his way to make in the world,

since he had quite given up all hopes of ever being able to gain absolute possession of the estates of Ballymoy. So, although Madge cried very bitterly when she gave Conn her farewell kiss, she would not even express a wish that he should remain at home. As soon as the ship had sailed, she and her uncle returned to Armstead; they spent one night in the cottage: the next day George Aldyn joined them, and they left the village for good. Madge had expressed herself quite willing to return to Ireland with her uncle as her only escort, but George would not hear of it, so he quickly overcame her objections and went with them to Ballymoy.

He remained for several weeks at Shranamonragh Castle, and during that time he and Madge were seldom apart. Now that she was once again in her own

home, amongst her own people, her whole being seemed to change. Her face lost its grave sad look, and lightened up with joy and gladness; happiness and contentment were all around her, and once more she heard the sound of happy voices ring from end to end of the castle walls.

At first George Aldyn was amazed, then amused, at the new phase of life into which he was suddenly plunged. It was something new to him to see a lot of beggarly-looking ruffians hanging for ever about the house and walking in and out of the kitchen without so much as 'By your leave'—to find the doors unfastened at midnight, the windows often open. During the day, he looked on with an amused smile; now and again he could not refrain from making a few sarcastic remarks to Madge, and at night he wanted to sleep

with a loaded pistol beneath his pillow. But Madge laughed so heartily at this idea that it was at once discarded. George soon grew more at ease, and ere he had been many weeks in Ireland he was almost as popular in Ballymoy as Mr. Dunraven himself. That calm, gentlemanly manner of his pleased 'the boys,' and made them feel a double pleasure in winning from him praise of any kind.

'This kind of life will quite unfit me for England,' said George one day. 'If I were a rich man, Madge, I would pay off this mortgage-money and become an Irish landowner! But such luck is not in store for me, I fear. I have flown in the face of Providence, as one would say, and must abide the issue. And you, little one,' he continued, lifting her face caressingly to his, 'self-sacrificing to the last, you have

agreed to link your lot with a man who, much as he would wish, cannot raise a finger to do you a good turn!'

'You have brought me happiness—that is all I want. If you do not regret the past, be sure I never shall!'

For answer he took her in his arms and kissed her, and Madge was quite content to rest her head upon his shoulder.

A few months after that day, George Aldyn remembered, with a strange feeling of self-reproach, the words which he had uttered. His father, seized with a spasm of the heart, to which he had an hereditary predisposition, fell dead at the church-door; and at his death his son, whom he had never quite forgiven, became a wealthy man.

EPILOGUE.

THERE is rejoicing in Ballymoy. 'Caed mille fealta—caed mille fealta!' is the cry which echoes loudly in Madge's ears. She stands in the great kitchen at Shranamonragh Castle, surrounded by a wild crowd of men, women, and children. They cling to her, kissing her hands and murmuring their blessing. Presently the enthusiasm increases. Madge draws from her pocket

a letter which bears the American post-mark, and opening it, reads aloud the messages which Conn sends to his old friends in Ballymoy. Since he has been in America, Conn has prospered well; he writes with such spirits that Madge believes the old bitterness to have passed entirely from his heart, and he talks of paying an early visit to his home.

George Aldyn is now absolute master of Ballymoy. At Shranamonragh Castle, Mr. Dunraven has resigned his place as head of the house, but is quite content to stay and spend his remaining years in the arm-chair by the fire. So with Mr. Dunraven to clasp their hands and bless them, the tenantry to shout forth their approval, the young people are welcomed home.

As Madge returns Conn's letter to her

pocket, she wishes her people 'good-night,' and takes her husband's arm.

'Are you happy, Madge?' he whispers as he leads her away.

'Quite happy, dear.'

He stoops and kisses her.

'We have learnt at least one lesson, my darling, which I hope we shall never forget all through our married life.'

'What is that, George?' she asks quietly.

'Only this, Madge, that come what may, we will never save our happiness by a lie, or turn a human creature, however sinful and miserable, from our house-door!'

THE END.

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